BIG ROMANCES OF THE WEST

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STAR WESTERN

A STORY OF SIX-GUN RECKONING

RIDERS OF GUNSMOKE RANGE

by T. C. McCLARY

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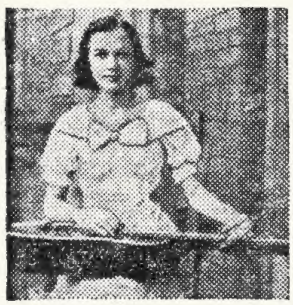

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STAR WESTERN

BIG ROMANCES OF THE WEST

VOLUME 54 DECEMBER, 1953 NUMBER 2

★ ★ ★ ★ Thrilling Novelettes ★ ★ ★ ★

RIDERS OF GUNSMOKE RANGE.....*T. C. McClary* **14**
He had no use for women, Shorty didn't, until one woman asked him to die for a weak-gutted hombre she loved better than him.

WILDCAT ON THE PROD!.....*Will Cook* **44**
Two men . . . one woman . . . and the knowledge that one had to die more deadly than the sixguns between them. . . .

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Until Les met Ella, Overton was only a cattle market—after, he knew it'd be building a tombstone—with his sixguns deciding just over whom!

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★ ★ Adventurous Short Stories ★ ★

SHARP SHOOTING SIREN.....*Cy Kees* **36**
No man dared make a fool of Bode Belkner—until gorgeous Karen and the man she loved wanted each other more than life itself—in somebody else's arms!

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ACES AND QUEENS

ONE of the most amazing and dynamic of all the amazing and dynamic women who helped build the West was Big Ella Watson, better known as Cattle Kate. John T. Lynch was written us of this fabulous woman's history. . . .

Jim Averill knew full well that, early in 1888, the entire Valley of the Sweetwater was a powder keg. One small act of violence could turn Wyoming's touchiest trouble spot into an inferno of fire and blood.

Since 1884, when the famous Maverick Bill was passed by the Territorial Legislature under the direction of the powerful Wyoming Stock Grazer's Association, the always delicate situation in the Valley had steadily grown worse. This law stated that all unbranded cattle on the ranges automatically became the property of the Association. Also, all so-called "rustler brands" were to be classed as mavericks. And any barnd that did not belong to an Association member was a "rustler's brand."

Thus, any small rancher who could not afford to join the great Association became a "rustler" and his steers, "stolen cattle."

Originally, Jim Averill was leader and spokesman for the little men, ranchers, homesteaders, and nesters. Preaching that peaceful, logical, and legal methods would win out in the long run, he prevailed upon the anti-Association group to trust him and the courts of law to break the terrible power of the cattle barons and land speculators.

But as time went by, lawmen, politicians, and judges became tools of the great owners, and the condition of the small rancher became unbearable. Although Jim Averill, maintaining headquarters in his general store-and-saloon in the heart of the Valley, was still looked upon as the leader of the weaker faction, his followers were beginning to demand a change of attitude and tactics. But for Jim's strong influence, many of the nesters, homesteaders and ranchmen would have resorted to violence long since to protect what they had left.

Jim had already arranged a meeting between representatives of the two factions, at which matters were to be "ironed out" sensibly, when Kate Maxwell came along.

Kate, better known as "Big Ella" Watson to lawmen of Missouri, Colorado and Montana, had decided that a lady of twenty-six should give up the nomadic and hectic life of a female bunco artist and settle down. Because she liked the sound of "Sweetwater Valley" she chose this spot

(Continued on page 8)

HER HIGHNESS

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J. J. Argue of Burns Lake, B. C., Canada writes 11.5.52: ". . . sending you $2.00 . . . forward Lucky Cornish Piskie, Joan the Wad, to a friend of mine. Have had one for years and enjoyed good health and better than average prosperity ever since getting 'Joan' from a friend."

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WONDERFUL

Dominick Anhorn of Owatonna, Minnesota, U.S.A. writes 27.9.52: "Received Joan the Wad a couple of months ago and it has been wonderful to me. Enclosing $3.00 for which please send me another Joan the Wad and Jack O'Lantern."

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(Continued from page 6)

on which to homestead. Changing her name, mode of fancy dress, and general attitudes, she hired a few hands, built herself a small spread, and started to shop for a few head of cattle to lay the foundation of what she hoped would, one day, become a great herd. It was at this point in her new life that Kate became acquainted with the situation. The cattle she bought were immediately claimed by the Association, who sent word that three "representatives" would arrive to pick up the steers.

In order to assure them a typical Kate Maxwell "welcome" she went to Jim Averill's store for supplies—a new Winchester, a sixgun, and ammunition.

Averill waited on her, himself. After filling the order he said, "None of my affair, ma'am, but who are you going to shoot?"

Jim asked the question as a joke. He presumed the woman was going to do some normal hunting to supply herself and hands with wild fowl, rabbit meat and other delicacies.

"I'm going to shoot me some "representatives' of the Wyoming Stock Grazer's Association," said Kate. "They sent word they'd come tomorrow to take my cattle. They will, too, if they ain't too dead."

Jim Averill shook his head. "You don't mean that, do you?"

"Hell I don't," said the lady. "Them animals is mine. I keep 'em. Who do they think they are, I bought them cattle."

"I know, I know," Jim cut in. "But I don't want you to resort to violence. Let 'em take your cattle. You'll get 'em back real soon. But, if you do any shooting, it will cause real trouble, and nobody will get anything."

Jim Averill talked sense in his most eloquent manner. He traced the beginnings and the buildup of the tense situation, leaving out nothing of importance. When he had finished, Kate said, "You're just a damn fool, mister. It's you the small ranchers should get rid of. Because of you an' your milk-sop ideas, they sat back an' let themselves get pushed against the wall. They should've fought from the start. They should've done some shootin' an' burnin' and a lot of cattle stealin' from th' first. Well, I don't agree with your fool saintly notions of justice in the courts. I'm goin' to handle this in my own way."

"But, don't you see, you might set the Valley on fire. The way things are now, even a small thing would cause a lot of killing and would help nobody. I promise you, let things alone until the meeting with the Association. I'm sure everything will be worked out fine."

"They ain't goin' to take my cattle," said Kate. "Not mine!"

With the aid of her four cowhands, Kate gave the Association's tough errand boys a hot lead reception the following morning. Not accustomed to such active resistance, the surprised "representatives" did not remain in Kate's vicinity long. Instead, they hastened to the Association Headquarters and reported the amazing action. Very few of the small ranchers had ever displayed such effrontery. Those who had were long dead, and served as example to others.

It was high time to set few more examples, the officials of the Association decided. Innate chivalry would not permit them to make an example of a lady, so they chose three other small ranches, instead. That night the three ranches were looted and burned, and all cattle belonging to the "rustlers" were confiscated.

As news of the outrages spread, the small ranchers, homestead people and nesters converged on Jim Averill's place.

"Jim, how much longer we goin' to wait for the courts to protect our rights, an' give us back our cattle?" was the first question asked at the meeting.

Kate Maxwell decided to answer the question. "We ain't goin' to wait at all," she shouted. "Seems like you ninnies been settin' back long enough. Nobody will help

(Continued on page 10)

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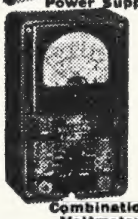

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(Continued from page 8)

you but yourselves. We gotta just fight!"

Most of those present knew very well that Jim Averill had acted in good faith when he preached passive resistance and waiting with patience until justice would prevail. They looked upon Jim as their leader, trusted him, and were still willing to abide by his decisions.

Kate got a round of light applause, but they wanted to hear what Jim had to say.

"Gents, two days ago, if anybody had asked me if we were going to pursue a peaceful course, as usual, I would have said 'Yes.' But, after what happened last night—and after giving the thing a lot of thought—I've come to realize that I was mistaken. I see, now, there's no hope of getting the cattle barons and speculators to do the right thing simply because it is right. They won't be satisfied until they've got the whole Valley and what's in it. And now—they've got to fight us for it."

"That's the stuff!" cried Kate Maxwell. "We'll give 'em all a dose of their own medicine. We'll see who owns this range."

Jim Averill then pointed out, to the enthusiastic gathering, how they must work and plan together, instead of each fighting a war of his own.

"That's right," Kate put in, in her shrill voice. "We got to hang together!"

Under Jim's able planning and direction, the small ranchers began a series of effective night forays, conducting their own roundups. Great numbers of cattle disappeared from the Association ranges. The organization's gun slingers were unable to cope with the situation. The band of little men proved to be strong, brave, and elusive.

Cattle Kate, appointing herself Jim's second-in-command, proved herself valuable in many ways. Her oft repeated remark, "We got to hang together," had immense psychological value when any of the small ranchers wavered in their purpose. Her intelligent method of bribing officials at the railheads to accept the stolen cattle for shipment, as well as her contacts with independent Eastern buyers, were of great practical value. Also, because of its unique and strategic position in the Valley, Kate Maxwell's ranch was used as the main collection point for the stolen cattle.

Within a few months the profits started to roll in. Not only were the anti-Associationers repaid for the cattle they had lost to the big organization, but many of them began to realize huge profits.

As the herds on the big properties diminished, the little men, getting a taste of riches and power, went hog wild. Hiring many professional gun-hands and cattle rustlers, Jim Averill, Kate Maxwell, and their large band of former honest men rode, plundered, and killed with a vengeance.

By the time the Association sent emissaries to ask for a truce and a just and peaceful agreement as to division of the Valley cattle and ranges, it was too late. The small men were no longer satisfied to be merely small ranchers, honest homesteaders, and common nesters.

"They had no pity on us. We'll have none for them," Kate declared many times.

Jim Averill was the most changed man of all. His store expanded, and he started to live like a cattle baron, himself. Greed and avarice replaced his former characteristics of honest leadership and honesty.

The small men were just as bad, or worse, in their way, than had been the Association men, in theirs. The Valley of the Sweetwater became a hell-spot of bushwhacking, thievery, and pillage.

The big stockmen, at wit's end for once in their lives, decided that the small ranchers would go back to their former peaceful ways if deprived of the leadership of Kate Maxwell and Jim Averill. If the little men no longer heard Kate's battle cry, "We got to hang together!" or Jim's fiery orations about the past sins of the Association men, peace would return to the Valley—and power to the barons.

(Continued on page 12)

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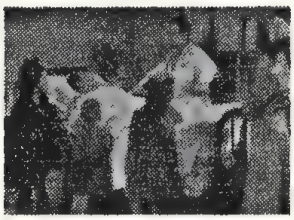

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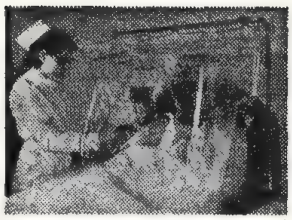

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(Continued from page 10)

Sometime, in the course of the big trouble in Sweetwater Valley, Kate Maxwell had been re-named, simply, "Cattle Kate." It was by this moniker that she became known throughout the West, and later, throughout the world. It was this name she was using on the night that twenty men suddenly descended on her ranch, killed her four cowhands, and took the lady and Jim away in a wagon.

The grim, silent cattlemen accompanied the lumbering wagon to a remote spot on the bank of the Sweetwater. During the three mile trek only Cattle Kate's shrill voice was heard. She cursed her captors, individually and collectively, throughout the tense trip.

"You sons ain't goin' to do anything much," she said scornfully. "You can't scare us, can they, Jim?" Kate yelled. "If you think takin' us to the wilderness an' losin' us is goin' to stop our plans, you're crazy as hell. Me an' Jim has got this Valley under our thumbs, now, an' we aim to keep it that way."

Nobody paid the slightest attention to the woman. Jim Averill, pale and shaking, said nothing.

The group came to a halt near a huge cottonwood tree.

As Jim climbed weakly to the ground, Kate jumped up. "If Jim gets out here, so do I," she announced. "No matter what —Jim an' I don't go separate ways. We got to hang together."

"That's exactly what you're going to do," said the cattleman. "Hang together."

"Why, you ain't got nerve enough to hang a woman," Kate laughed. "Jim, perk up. They're just tryin' to scare us. Looks like they're doin' it, too, by the looks of you—you little coward."

Actually, as many of the cattlemen agreed some time later, the original intention was, as Kate surmised, merely to frighten the pair. But, under Kate's goading and from other factors that have never been explained, the twenty men did hang Cattle Kate and Jim Averill together.

The hanging was such a terrible spectacle that five of the men involved went to the sheriff, the next day, reported the deed, and gave themselves up, after naming all of the others.

"I guess I won't ever sleep again," said one of the confessors. "I'll always see that woman, her eyes bulgin' out, blood drippin' from her lips an' her arms an' legs flailin' th' air, while she strangled to death. We didn't think to put hoods on 'em, nor tie their hands an' legs. Wish we had. They both kept strugglin' for what seemed like a century, then they was still. When we rode away, the two bodies was swayin' in th' river breeze. It was awful—awful—"

The twenty lynchers were condemned by the public, press, pulpit, and their own Association. The folks of Wyoming felt disgraced in the eyes of the world.

Remorseful as the twenty cattlemen were, they soon proved that they could pull political strings more expertly than they could pull hangropes. When all were arrested and charged with the killings, bail was set at $5,000 each. Then the "charitable" judge permitted each defendant to sign another's bail bond!

A broad-minded grand jury waited patiently until all twenty had temporarily disappeared from Valley. When the cases went into court, they were immediately dismissed—for lack of evidence and witnesses.

Deprived of their leaders, the small ranchers soon forgot Cattle Kate's admonition to "hang together." Each went his own way, and it wasn't long until the cattle barons and land speculators had things all their own way, again.

Be sure to pick up the next issue of STAR WESTERN, filled as always with exciting stories of Western women and their men. The February issue will be on sale at your newsstand November 27th.

The Editor

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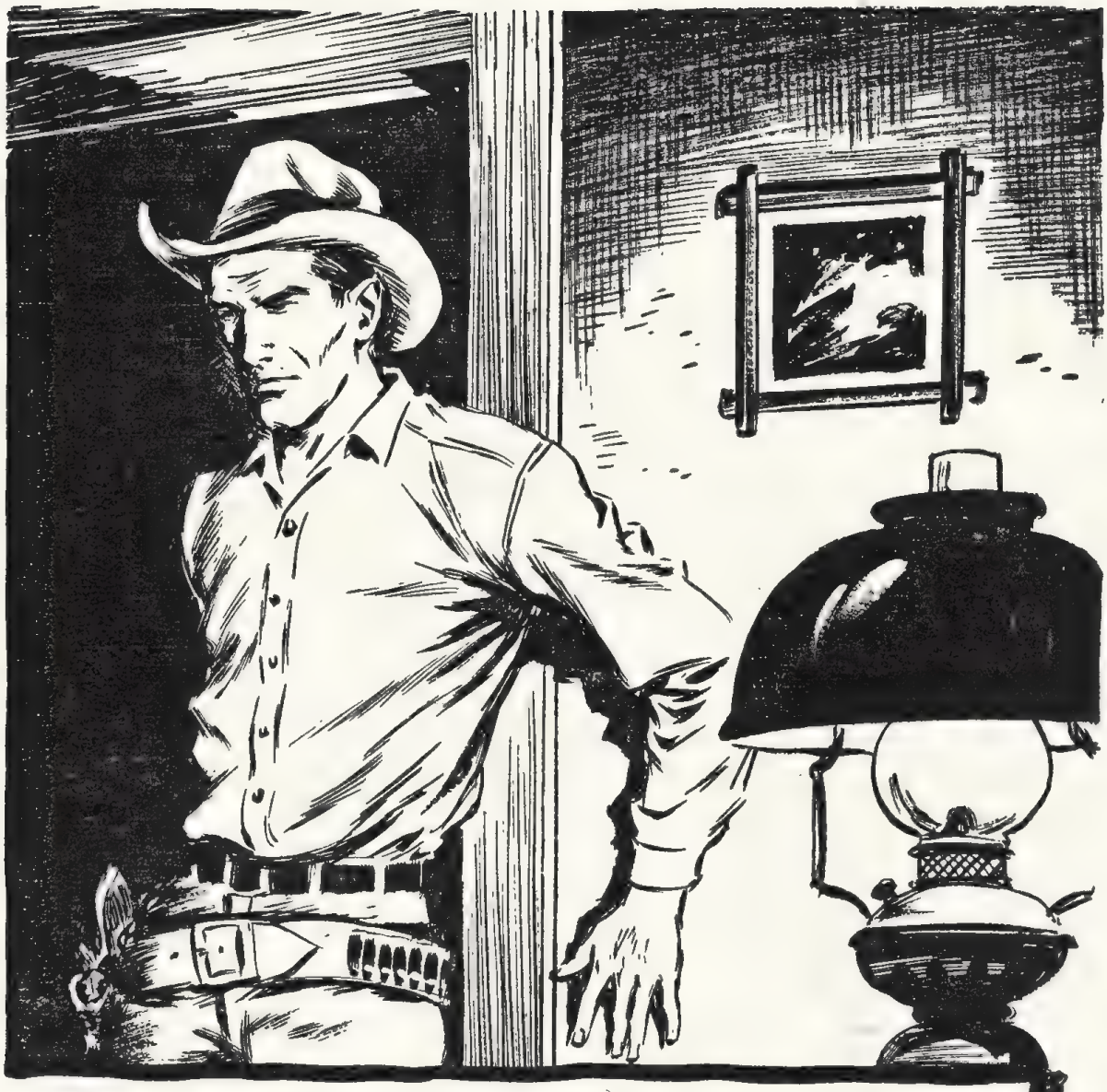
RIDERS OF GUNSMOKE RANGE

By T. C. McClary

He had no use for women, Shorty didn't, until he went for the one woman in town who'd ask him to die for a weak-gutted hombre she loved better than him!



She answered with her gun, looking mighty cute. . . .

I DIDN'T want anything more to do with trouble. I'd had a belly full of it for nine years, wherever I went, whatever I did. That last case, now, wasn't my fault at all. Some jasper got fresh and called me Shorty. I busted him up a little. Well, maybe a little too much, but I didn't kill him.

Two weeks later, out comes a posse to where I'm grazing a herd of thirty dogies, hoping to fatten 'em into a decent grubstake. This jasper's brother is with them, so I get the angle. But I'd spent six months alone, on lean vittles, out on that simmering desert and I wasn't giving those dogies up without a fight, no matter whom they'd been rustled off. So there was a

fight. I got a man, that jaspar's brother, and got away without toting any lead. But they got my herd, and all I had left was the twenty-two dollars in my levis.

No, sir, I didn't want any more trouble, so I headed to the slowpokiest cowtown I'd ever seen. All I wanted was a few square meals and a place to rest and some decent company for a spell, and a job if I could get it. I didn't figure this here town had seen any more trouble in thirty years than maybe a wrassling match, and that was fine with me.

I drifted into town about midway of Saturday morning. Same old drifting yellow heat, same dilapidated, weathered buildings, same ochre dust filling up the street. Not a tree in sight, not a blade of green. That was okay. That town looked sweet.

I stopped at the watering trough to give my gaunted pony a sniffer until it cooled and could have a real drink. Some pimply faced wiseacre drifted out to greet me. He was a kid, but he was big.

He said, "That's ten cents a drink, stranger."

I thought it was a rib and damned near grinned. But he wasn't grinning. I said, "Who told you that, Highpockets?"

He flamed and swelled his chest and bit out, "I'm telling. . . ." Then he got a good look at my eyes, and I guess he didn't like them. He switched his tune. He said sulkily, "My brother."

"You jist tell yore brother to collect then," I suggested.

I jerked my pony's head up and wheeled, slapping the fresh kid's face with a trail of horse slime. I left him cursing and ambled through the street and turned in at the old stables, just where I remembered.

A big red-faced hombre came out of a side office and gave my outfit the once over. He said, "Traveling light for a long ride."

"You stick to yore business, I'll stick to mine," I told him. "I want this critter cooled, watered, and scrubbed. I want her clean-bedded and grain-fed for a week."

He said, "Nine dollars . . . in advance."

I looked to see if he was kidding. He wasn't.

I took my near boot out of the box. I said, "I may be little, but I can kick like hell! Did you say three dollars like I understood?"

He got redder and blew through his hairy nostrils. He had close-set pig-eyes, and they got mean.

A big black-bearded man came out behind him. He'd been in the doorway sizing up my pony. My critter was bad gaunted, but it's blooded. This hombre knew it, and he said in a tone of soft grit, "Why, this fellow's been here before and knows the price, Steve. Take good care of him. I'd like to see that pony when it's fatted."

The stableman muttered, but took the reins. I came out of the saddle like a dried board and limbered while I gave this big blackbeard a once over. He was smiling and watching the horse like maybe he'd sometime own it.

I said, "I don't get so broke I sell my pony, friend."

"No?" he said, then chuckled in his chest. "Well, I don't get so rich I buy 'em, either."

I could take that several ways. It was his town, and I wasn't looking for trouble, so I let it ride and paid three dollars and hobbled over to the Eats.

I wrapped my legs around a stool and waited a couple of minutes while a good-looking waitress tried to tear loose of a conversation to wait on me. She didn't have much luck. Every time she started my way, a sleek jaspar grabbed her wrist and held her listening.

I said finally, "Give me water, and I'll clean up while yore finishing."

This fellow stopped talking then. He turned a hard, pretty face and stared at me. "What's the idea busting in when I'm talking to this girl?" he asked me.

"Mebbe," I suggested, "because I come in here to eat."

The waitress had used the chance to give me my water. I drank it off, and she poured me another. This pretty boy said, "You're kind of proddy for a stranger."

I started to give him a hot answer. Then I remembered I didn't want any more trouble. I got off the stool, and I didn't look so tall as sitting. I said, "Brother, all I want is vittles. You got plenty of time to talk while I scrape clean."

I WENT out the back door and peeled to the waist. I had about four hundred miles of trail grime on me, and I smelled better when I was finished. I took the time to comb my hair and clean my nails. That's just habit, but I guess I was thinking of that peach.

The slick jay was just leaving when I come back. He was saying, "Yo're a fool, Ann! They're operating, and you've only got old Charley out there, and they'll hit your place first of any. I've made you a good offer, considering."

She was looking down at the counter, and on account of I'm short, I could see she was biting her lip. She said, "Well. I'll think on it, Satin."

"Think fast," he warned. "On account of I'm going away for a spell, and, with me off the range, it's a good chance those boys will get to work."

She nodded. He threw me a dirty glance, then set his hat, and moved out like he owned the place.

The girl straightened abruptly and brought me a menu. I asked, "Why don't you put it on a blackboard?"

"Look hard and mebbe you'll see," she suggested. She looked at my clean nails, and it made its impression. She was studying me more friendly like when I looked back from the price list.

"You too?" I growled. "What's happened to this berg? Those prices were high as the stables."

She made a kind of miserable gesture. "You're real curious to know, you might ask 'em at the Star," she suggested. "But if I was you, I wouldn't." She pointed at the menu. "Now that stew ain't cheap, but it's good, and there's nothing to stop me giving you more of it."

I grunted a sound. "You own this place?" I asked.

She nodded. I saw she wore a wedding ring, but on her right hand. She'd be a widow, I reckoned. Not more than twenty one, either.

"So things are that way?" I muttered. "I'll have the stew."

She heaped my plate, I'll say that. And she gave me java that was java. She filled my plate and cup again without my asking. I finished a slab of pie, and she filled my cup again. That made things just about right for the price of the stew.

I rolled a smoke. I said, "This used to be a real quiet, lazy little town."

"It's still plenty lazy," she told me.

She had violet eyes and hair like midnight, and I've seen pretty, bare mountains didn't cut a better line. Like I said, I'd been lonesome ranging a desert for six months and maybe I was too impressed. Leastwise, maybe I showed it too much. She flushed.

I took my eyes off her fast and pecked at a crumb of crust. "I been on range quite a spell," I said by way of apology.

"That's all right," she said a little stiff. Then she laughed. "I guess I know what it is to live lonesome a long time. You can be that way even in a town." Something broody happened to her eyes. "Particularly this town!" she added.

"Ain't there dances hereabouts no more?" I asked.

"Oh, there'll be one this evening at the carnival," she said. Her eyes darted at me. Funny expression. Kind of hopeful, kind of scared. I thought of that slick hombre, but that wouldn't be it. He was after business. Probably more too, but mostly business.

She waved her hand the opposite way

from where I'd come in. "Down at the holding pens," she added.

I got off the stool and stretched. "I'd be real pleased if you favored me with a dance," I said.

"This is a tough town now," she warned.

"You got a tough boy?" I grunted.

She gave a kind of melancholy laugh. "My man," she said, "is crippled. But he's just a friend. . . ." Her voice broke and caught, and then she added, "I guess."

I paid up and tipped my hat. I spur-dragged out, thinking she had real class. I didn't have much use for women, not since I learned about 'em nine years back. But as they went, she had class. She could talk, and she had eyes, and there was heat in her. I thought of what she'd said about being lonesome right in a town. Maybe she was scared of letting loose that heat. But I sure wasn't!

I stood on the edge of the walk, watching the growing traffic in the roiling dust smoke and studying a big, shabby-looking saloon that said *Star*. There were other saloons, but that one got the trade. I saw the fresh kid come out and go back in after a time, and I saw the jaybird she'd called Satin stroll out with a big cigar and move down to the hotel.

Then I turned, and the marshal was studying me. He looked like a fellow who might have been nice but had gotten off trail somewhere and was trying to hide the shame of it from himself. He had that hollow look under the surfaces of his eyes.

I nodded and asked him, "Every man around here own a gold mine?"

"Well, prices do be a little high," he conceded. "But they're the same for everyone."

"Everyone sucker enough to pay," I corrected.

He bristled a little. "You one of these trouble-making drifters?"

"I figured I wasn't, but now I'm figuring maybe I better," I answered.

"You'll find trouble enough if you look for it!" he warned. "Particularly, with the law, bucko!"

I laughed, and the sound wasn't too nice. "When trouble's that easy to find, usually the trouble is the law," I told him.

I left him gobbling and blowing and ducked traffic across to the saloon. I stood outside a space catching my sight and listening to what I could hear over the swing doors. Some bunch was inside rawhiding some single galoot about his girl, and some of the remarks were pretty wide. He wasn't joining their humor any, but he was trying to switch the conversation.

I thought, Why doesn't he crack a few heads together? and drifted on in. Then I saw the reason.

MY BLACK-BEARDED friend from the stableyard and half a dozen tough riders just about his size were holding down the center of the bar. This single hombre stood at the end of the bar alone. One look was all you needed to know he was badly crippled, and so self-conscious of it that he never forgot it for an instant.

"Maybe he forgot it once or twice, and they taught him not to," I thought. They didn't look above it. They were a mean-mouthed bunch.

The fresh kid I'd met earlier poked Blackbeard and muttered something and Blackbeard eyed me and boomed, "Why sure enough, if it ain't the visiting jockey with the thoroughbred!"

I thought I ought to make something of that before the hazing started, but then, as I said, I wasn't looking for trouble and maybe it was just his idea of a joke. I nodded at him and shut up and went to the bar. The cripple looked relieved, but he looked kind of worried for me too.

I called for a whisky. It should have been fifteen cents a tumbler, two for a quarter. The smart poke back of the bar winked at Blackbeard and slid out one of these woman's glasses the size of a thimble and charged two bits.

I held the red poison up to the light and admired its color. "How old?" I asked. For that price, it should have been twenty year stock.

"Old enough," the barkeep said.

"But not big enough," I told him. "Not even big enough to wipe the dirt off yore face," and I splashed the thimble of whisky in his eye.

I followed up while he still sputtered with surprise. I jumped and leaned over the bar and grabbed his shirt and slapped him back and forth across the face, hard. I said, "Some people get the idea I'm kind of short, but there's damn little I can't reach."

He backed off a couple of steps not knowing what to do. He looked at Blackbeard. "Blacky, you going to let a stranger come in and wreck my place?" he said.

The incident tickled Blackbeard's humor. He was guffawing. "Why, I didn't see him do nothing but try to kiss you!" he boomed and slapped his knee.

"I'll take a whisky now," I said.

I got it, though the barkeep muttered. It was still a short tumbler, and it was still two-bits, but I got my whisky. I got something better. It took the heat off me until I could get a chance to smell around and count the snakes stinking up this town.

The kid went out with a sullen look, and Blackbeard made a few leading, but grinning remarks. Then the kid called him from the door, and the whole bunch of rangey giants tromped out. There were a couple of other drinkers way down the bar, but at our end there was just the cripple and me.

I moved a little nearer and asked him outright, "What do you take that guff off those big overgrown porks for?"

He colored and made circles with his glass. "Ain't too much I can do about things since I was busted up," he said.

Feeling sorry for himself, and gone yellow to boot, I thought. Nice looking boy, too. He could stand a heap straighter if he tried, but he's done lost all his pride.

It didn't matter much to me except I was trying to figure what the girl saw in him, figuring this was the hombre she'd referred to. That was just nosiness too. It wouldn't make any difference in what I did. She looked a cut better than the rest, but she was still a woman. Take 'em and leave 'em, and let them worry about what kind of skunks they'd been. Out in the dark, they were all the same. I guessed I ought to know!

I had a beer after my whisky. That was short and overpriced too. I was beginning to get real irritated about this town. I had to tell myself not to go getting dragged into any fresh trouble. But I couldn't see much else here for me, except the girl. I had sure ridden a long way to the wrong place looking for a little lazy peace and good company.

I passed some time and then went out on the stoop and had a smoke and watched the jostling crowd pounding back and forth along the walks. The crowd was something, at least. You get hungry just to see and hear people after six months with nothing but cows.

After a spell, I went around to the stables to see if the big piece of blubber there had tended to my pony. Satin was talking to him in front of the stable door, looking as if they'd just come out.

I thought, Oh-oh, I've walked right smack into the trouble I was trying to keep out of so hard!

But he surprised me. He said almost friendly, "That is a right nice pony when she's rested, stranger."

I saw now where he got his name. Smooth, he was. I said, "She's done all right by me."

"Going to stay around a spell?" he asked.

"I ain't got a goldmine," I grunted.

He smiled. He wasn't the kind to grin or laugh. Just a smile, like a wolf pulling its lips back across its teeth. "Prices a little

high for you? Well, that's just meant for them we don't cotton to." He looked at the stableman. "Maybe you could pass the word out to treat this stranger right?"

The red-faced man's eyes popped, and he blurted some meaningless sounds. Then he nodded and forgot to stop. "Why, sure, if you say so Mr. Latham! Sure, I'll tell the boys."

Satin gave him a dirty look then turned to me. "I'd tell them myself, but there is a rough crowd here that I don't get along with too well. Charley, here, can fix things better."

I knew it was double talk, but I didn't quite get it, so I just nodded and moved on into the stables. There was a pinto in a box stall, and I figured that would be Satin Latham's. My own pony was fresh bedded, but the straw hadn't been tromped down yet. Somehow, it crossed my mind that straw hadn't been thrown in until after Satin Latham got there.

I took her out of the stall and outside. Both men had disappeared. She hadn't been scrubbed yet, but she didn't want water, and she'd had oats. Her eyes were brighter already. We'd had a long, gaunt trail. I curried her down a little, just to make her feel good, washed up, and took the chance to wash my shirt. It dried in the time I had a cigarette. I was hungry again and went back to Ann's Eats.

CHAPTER TWO

A Strong Slug

FIVE other people were in there, growling about prices. Ann handed me the menu with a kind of sullen look. "You meet the right people fast, don't you?" she asked.

She didn't wait for an answer. I looked at the menu. It had the same listings, but the prices were different. These were about a third what the others had been. I broke down and had steak. I thought, maybe I was going to enjoy the town after all. That is, for a spell. Until my pony fattened. I figured somebody, like Blackbeard or Satin, wanted to get that pony. They were going to keep me around for a while.

The calliope began to toot down at the carnival. The crowds thinned out in that direction. Ann's Eats crowded up three times and emptied fast. Then nobody came for fifteen minutes and she hung up the sign, *Closed*.

I said, "Could I walk you down or will your friend be coming?"

"If it's just the walk you want," she said, "I'm meeting him there." I guess I looked a little funny. She explained, with a gentleness touching her, "He makes excuses, but it's me he's thinking of. He doesn't want to embarrass me more than he can help."

"What's he do?" I asked.

"He's got a ranch," she said. She looked somber. "It's pretty hard for him to keep it going since he got smashed."

"Stampede?" I said.

"Yes, but there was some dirty work. Or so some claimed. He'd have been clear, but his cinches broke." She looked down, into memory, running her index finger along the counter. "Funny," she said, "the same thing happened to Fred . . . my husband . . . six years back."

I began to catch the smell. It was just seven years back that I had stopped here. Then this had been a peaceable little town, but somebody had begun operating, probably picking the mildest victims first. Maybe it was meant as a warning to the community at large, maybe there was a more personal angle. Then the toughs had moved in and laid their assessment on the town. I would bet that explained the hollowness within the marshal's eyes; he'd played politics with them.

Same old words with a different tune, I thought, here, there, any cowtown. If you are tougher than the toughs, they don't move in. Looks like the only one tougher here was Satin. But the toughs had still

moved in. Well, it was none of my business. I meant to have my time and dust. As I said, I was through with trouble.

Ann prettied up, and she looked like a million dollars. I've seen rich rancher's wives who couldn't cut her class. At that, she was a rancher too, I guessed, from the way she'd talked with Satin. It would be a small ranch though, with only one old herder, probably supported out of the profits of the Eats.

Day's simmering heat had built into a breathless blanket, but it wasn't holding the crowd back from the carnival. We walked the half mile slow and easy. She had a pace to her. She had the rhythm of a fine blooded mare. I made a few leading compliments, and she took them pretty, but I couldn't pry her open about local conditions.

Jay, her cripple, was waiting for her. For all that his whole left side was busted up, he had a breadth of shoulder to him, and there was nothing spindly about his chest. He didn't seem put out at all that I was with her. He even stood off from her making it clear that he was downright glad she'd found the company of a really whole man.

At first it filled me with disgust, particularly as he'd shamble ahead and buy the tickets at every concession that we stopped at. But as the day wore on into evening's softer pastel light, I began to feel sorry for the galoot. It was clear as hell that he was nuts about the girl. He couldn't keep his eyes off her. But he wouldn't even move close by her so that people might think she was attached.

She was popular. The whole country had a smile for her. Even Blackbeard's tough bunch perked up and touched their hats when she passed. I could feel the distaste in her, but she was civil. She knew how to handle men.

The fresh kid, now, that was a different thing. I could feel her freeze when she found the kid looking at her. Freeze like a rabbit, with her heart tripping fast. I asked who he was.

She said, "Blacky's young brother."

I said, "He's only a kid."

"That what makes him danger—" she started, then broke off fast.

I said, "Do you want me to go and slap him into looking elsewhere?"

We were walking, and she stopped dead. She gave me a long, thoughtful look. "Do you know what you'd be walking into?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Probably Blacky and his five wolverines."

"There are nine," she said. Then she looked down at the ground and slowly strolled ahead. "I think you meant that," she murmured.

I agreed that I did.

"If I were a different kind of woman, I might take you up," she told me. "It would be the worst one out of my hair at least. But I'd have to get flowers for your funeral."

"It might be worth the chance," I pointed out.

I saw the slow spread of color that ran down the smooth column of her neck. But she didn't balk. We just walked on down the midway, and almost at the end she asked, "Do you mean to stay around long?"

That jolted. I didn't know which way she was interested, and I sure didn't want to spoil my chances. Then I thought, Hell, put it bold. She can take it.

So I answered, kind of blunt, "No. But long enough for that."

Her color deepened, and her breath quickened, but she didn't flare. She just swung us back through the roistering crowd, still walking with her face down. Then she shook her head, to herself, and let out a long breath of regret.

I knew the tally then. She'd make a deal if she could make a fair one, but she didn't figure this was fair. For a woman, she had a lot of good points. I began to like her.

THE intensity of day's heat began to die and the boys and girls began to drift onto the big dance floor. I had the first dance, and she promised me some others. Wheeling with her in your arms sure stoked up a man's boilers. For a break with her, I'd have taken on ten wildcats.

Dusk flowed out from the distant hills, and the carnival put on its colored lights, and you could hear the band and the calliope and the barkers and the wild yips of the boys and shrill cries of the women all at once. It was turning out to be a real pleasant day after all.

Some of the local belles looked my way, but I didn't have any time for them, and I drifted around alone between dances with Ann. There was a wrestling fellow there challenging all comers. The boys egged Blackbeard into taking him on. Blackbeard made twice of him, and looked fierce when stripped to the waist. That didn't stop Blackbeard from slipping the professional bull ten dollars, though, and returning the prize money later. I caught that.

It gave me a new slant on Blacky. He was tough all right, and I figure he was tough enough to have stood a good chance on his own. But he wasn't taking the chance. He wanted to be damned sure to win. I figured there was more than just vanity to it. I figured he was scared of losing the brute whip over his tough bunch if they ever saw him lose.

I'd seen Satin around a couple of times, nodding and parading and talking like a range lord, and I suppose he was. Two or three times I saw him pass the tough bunch without even giving Blacky a nod. They'd turn and peer after him some, but they didn't give him any straight looks when he passed.

It was better sign of what the range thought of him than even the kowtowing he got from lesser ranchers. Somewhere in him he had a pretty tough streak himself, and I wondered where. I could only spot five waddies from his own outfit, and they looked capable, but not too tough.

He took the dance before my next one with Ann, and I will hand it to him that he cut a handsome figure. The other dancers drew off and gave them solo room, and, at the end, gave them a whoop and heavy hand.

That roughed me up some, and I was kind of gruff when I came to claim my dance. I figured she'd still be flushed and breathless and full of "Oh's" and "Ah's" about him, but as soon as I got her away from him, she clutched my hand and shook her head, and almost ran with me toward the shadows.

There were some tables there and she sat down biting her lip, and her hands were cold and she had them clenched. I figured she needed winding time, and I went and got us a soda pop, and then got it doctored up a little, figuring she needed it. She did.

It was a strong slug, and she quieted down after a little and thanked me, but it didn't lift her spirits. She was busting to talk something out with somebody, and we couldn't spot Jay, and so she finally blurted out the facts.

She had maybe eighty head of cattle left on a little ranch that had been her husband's. Some were old and some scrawny, but there were about twenty head of prime, and, except for the Eats, that was every dime in the world she had. Of course, twice a year she needed outside help, but right now she only had one old half-deaf cowboy riding herd, and there'd been quite some rustling lately, and by the nature of things, her spread was practically marked.

Satin had offered to buy the spread, lock, stock, and barrel, for a price she didn't mention, but I took it, for a song. But it wasn't the price that was bothering her. Womanlike, she was just plumb set on hanging on to her home. Only a ranch home without cattle isn't anything at all.

And here was Satin going away this very night, and probably all hell would break loose on the range while he was gone. If

she sold out, she'd lose her home, but, if she got rustled, she'd be cleaned out, and she only had an hour now to make up her mind.

I looked in through the flaring lights at where Blackbeard was playing darts to the envy of a crowd, and I grunted, "Shouldn't be hard to figure who might try to rustle them critters."

"But who'd stop them even if they knew?" she almost cried.

I said, "I reckon I'd make a try." I looked straight at her until her eyes met mine. "Fact is, I'd be right pleased to make a try for you. It could make the rest of my visit here a heap sight more pleasant, couldn't it?"

I could almost feel the heat flood into her cheeks. I saw her jaws set, and heard the breath suck through her teeth. But she didn't look away. Suddenly she put out her hand to shake, and her grip was cold, and it was steel. She said, "A deal, Shorty, but nothing on credit. This is a straight trade, if you want it that way?"

I growled a gruff laugh, but nodded. "You're a tough trader, Ann," I told her.

I thought she'd ease off a little then and laugh, and after a spell we'd get back where we'd been with that secret betwixt us to kind of stoke things up. I didn't know my gal.

She got up abruptly and said, "Now if you'll take me back, I'm favored with this dance."

SO I TOOK her back, and one of the young ranchers swept her off. It didn't make me feel sore at all that he began by stepping on her foot. I was feeling a little rough.

I drifted across to an open shed where the Star had moved for the occasion. I had two double slugs and told the barkeep to damn the price and size. But I got big tumblers, and he took only a quarter, and he looked embarrassed as hell that he'd ever asked anything else.

I thought, You make friends fast when Satin Latham sends out the word!

I bought a cigar and stood at the edge of the crowd smoking, and suddenly I perked up at something that was happening. First Blackbeard drifted off alone, and then, one by one, the rest of his tough crew. If they'd gone in a bunch, I wouldn't have even bothered looking. But this was a funny way to go, and so I followed the last one.

They'd gone off toward one of the dark long sheds, and moving carefully through the shadows, I keened cigar smoke even before I heard voices. I crept just near enough along the other side so that I could hear. Right on my line, at the end, I could see the block of shadow of a man on watch.

I heard Blackbeard's deep grumble, then Satin's low but sharp voice. "Never mind that," Satin said. "Blacky, you stay in town, and that will quiet later talk. You send me out five men, and don't send your loco brother, or I'll scalp you! Have them at the rock at midnight of the first dark of the moon."

"What about this half pint stranger?" Blacky growled. "He's been getting close to Ann. Jay too. I hear he's asked a few questions."

Satin gave a thin, hard laugh. "He's probably hotter than we are! If he isn't, he's going to be, so treat him nice and see that he sticks around. But get him out of sight until your men get back if you have to dope his liquor and buy him every blonde in town!"

"I know how I'd like to get him out of sight!" Blacky growled, and I could picture him feeling his big brutal fist.

"No, they're going to have to be some lynchings to simmer the range down," Satin told him. "You do like I said, and don't slip. And stay here until I get out of this carnival for the night stage south."

There were a few more remarks, but I didn't wait. I melted back along the wall the way I'd come. I got around the cor-

ner and took the first decent breath I'd had. And I darted across to another dark building and walked clean around it and came back into the carnival through the tables where I'd sat with Ann.

Dark of the moon, I thought. That's Monday.

That was a helluva long time to wait when you were as proddy over a woman as I was. Too long to wait and stay clear of trouble. So I did two things I wouldn't have ordinarily done. I checked my gun, and looked up the company of Jay.

He was feeling morose and in a mixed mood about me. One minute he'd be talking up Ann's good points and how she must like me, almost like she was his sister. The next minute he'd turn glumb with jealousy. He knew damned well what my idea was.

I got some information out of him, anyway. I learned the trails and general layout of the country, and I learned that the rock was a pinnacle of rock marking the northeast boundary of Ann's ranch. I learned a few other things, but I couldn't ask too much. If I missed cutting into the rustling job and still had asked too much about the country, I'd be braiding my own hemp with no help from Satin needed.

We walked Ann home to her little flat above the Eats, and she took us in and made us breakfast, just as a hot dawn put its yellow-gray smudge across the east. She was in a mixed mood herself, half excited, and half aloof. Sometimes she was looking at me as if she hated me and hoped to the devil I'd be killed; at other times her eyes were like a cat's and wicked, and then she'd glance at Jay or hear his voice, and a woman's torn, but gentle, melancholy would flow through her.

She brushed us out when sunrise put its first flat rays through the window. Jay and I went down stairs and stood on the edge of the walk having a last smoke. He must have known that girl pretty good.

He said unhappily, "She's a fine woman. I wish to the devil she'd take a good man and marry him. She deserves a good one."

I took the chance to pry and asked, "Why not you?"

He breathed a rough note of hardest humor. "You mean the half of me? If I couldn't take care of myself alone, what would I do about caring for a woman?"

I said, "You'd do all right, I reckon."

He shook his head. "Nope, they finished me. Sometimes I wish they'd done a better job."

He nodded abruptly and turned and walked off to his pony.

I watched him dust out of town and then I went to the Star for a nightcap to keep the light out of my eye, and slept in the hotel lobby along with about half the rest of the range boys.

CHAPTER THREE

Smart Girl!

IT WAS half into afternoon when I came to. Ann's Eats was already open, and I drifted over there for java. The place emptied soon after I came in. I tried to make some small talk. She answered, in like vein, but she wasn't even hearing what she said. Her whole mind was on that little old ranch of hers, and if there'd be a rustling, and if I could stop it if there was, and then of the deal. She was cool, but not nasty-cool. Just kind of withdrawn.

I didn't pay too much attention. I've seen 'em frozen before, and I know what makes 'em thaw. They aren't all alike, but they're all women. That girl of mine, now, nine years ago. But then I figured I better not get to thinking on her or I'd get roiled.

Paying Ann, I said, "I may want to see you sometime late, after tomorrow midnight."

She lifted her eyes from the cash drawer and looked straight at me. Not even a blush this time. Just that straight, level, inscrutable look.

"You know where I live," she said. "I would answer to four double knocks. But

don't come drunk, Shorty. That's all."

Just for the hell of it, I said, "What if I did?"

"I answer that door with a gun," she said. "And I have never figured a drunk's word was reliable."

I said, "Unh!" and felt a grudging admiration for her bluntness. "But if I come sober?"

"I will take your word," she said. She dropped her face then. She was still standing just like that when I glanced back from the door.

I angled through the street's fine powdered dust to the Star and found myself an honored guest. That was fine and dandy with me. I can take a heap of double crossing for free drinks. The gals were poured on me as heavy. I didn't pay them much attention, but it gives a poor galoot a nice feeling.

The Star served food too, and along toward supper time, the biggest, juicest steaks you ever saw came out of nowhere. It appeared I wasn't the only one making hay. Blackbeard ate four steaks himself, and was ordering only the best liquor.

About eight o'clock, Jay came in with his hobbling gait, his eyes raking the crowd and fixing on me. Blackbeard chuckled something about my tough sidekick, and I used the excuse of being half drunk to resent that mildly and go talk with Jay to show my friendship.

Jay wasn't feeling too friendly. First, and under everything, I suspected, there was the girl. But he'd been thinking on the questions I had asked him yesterday. He wanted to know why I wanted to know about the rock.

The saloon was so noisy you couldn't hear yourself think, but it was no place to talk this business, and I gave him a poke under cover of the bar, and muttered a quiet date to meet him back at the carnival, which was still running. He looked nettled and suspicious but nodded, and then I pulled a drunkard's row with him and walked off from him with disgust before he could bleat some dumb crack.

The incident had been noted. Blacky chuckled, "You two getting jealous already?"

I said, "He's a damn muldoon. No wonder he got stampeded!"

"He still wears a gun," Blackie noted on a tone of oiled grit. "Ain't nothing to stop a man slapping him down."

"Gun?" I yipped. "Gawdamighty, I left my gun checked with them thieving carnies! I'd best trail down there fast."

"They give you any trouble, send word," Blacky said. "We're all one big family here."

"Sure," I agreed and got up and wove through the hot crowd.

I made my way, lurching a little now and then, down to the carnival. Ann was dancing. Not stiff of body, but somehow as if she didn't know she was there. I moved on up the midway and sank back in the shadows of the tables. In due time, Jay hobbled in the area, peering into the shadows like a jackass. He didn't see me and sat down. I sat quiet, waiting, and after a spell saw the fresh kid drift by, noting Jay before he passed along.

I cupped my hands and gave a loud hoarse whisper. "Jay, don't turn. Just listen. Go get a soda pop and come back and sit at the edge of the light. Sit facing the dance floor and keep watching it, and just listen to what I say."

He started, but he had the sense to keep his head forward. He built a smoke, lighted up, and then did what he'd been told. That put him back sitting ten feet in front of me. I crouched and crabbed under the next table, which cut the distance to five.

I said, "You want to know about the rock. I'm going out there at midnight tomorrow night. I'm going alone, and if somebody tries a rustle like I think, there's going to be a fight. You keep that to yoreself or they may try to take things out on Miss Ann."

The kid strolled along the midway again, his sharp eyes singling out Jay and cutting sign on others who were cuddling or lounging at other tables. He went on by.

I said, "I need a dark horse held in cover at the north end of town around ten o'clock."

He was silent so long that I thought he hadn't heard, or that he had, and wanted no part of helping out. Then he dropped his head once in a nod. "But don't try anything that hurts Ann!" he whispered hoarsely.

He got up abruptly and shambled away. Frustration, shame, misery, hope, and jealousy were all mixed up in him, and his feelings were so violent he walked almost straight. I felt sorry for him, but what the hell. I needed a horse, and I wanted the girl.

I WAITED a spell, then sank deeper into shadow and went around the barns, in reverse of the way I'd come last night. I found the place I'd checked my gun and got it for a dollar. I moved back, spur dragging, through the midway and watched the dance. When the square ended, I asked Ann for the favor. I thought she started to say she was booked, and then suddenly her gaze riveted upon me with a woman's wisdom and she nodded, "Second dance."

When I swung her out into a reel, she was stiff. I said roughly, "That makes me feel fine and dandy."

She said tightly, "I can't help it! I keep my bargains, if that is what you're afraid of."

I growled out, "I'm not. What I want is to sneak, pretty openly, up to your place tonight long enough to talk."

"You've been drinking," she pointed out.

"Not that much," I said.

All of this conversation was carried on piecemeal through the figures of the reel, of course. There is no place like a reel to scramble a conversation that others won't make head or tail of.

She waited until the very end of the dance to answer. Then she murmured, "All right. But don't forget my gun."

The reel ended, and I stood a moment glowering at her. I thought, what a hell of a way to send a man out to get killed for you! But I could take that out of her hide later. I bought her a pop, and then her next partner came, and I settled down to dancing intentionally with every other girl I could find.

The carnival would run high until dawn, but Ann trailed off in company with Jay along toward three o'clock. I followed, hugging the shadows and mixing with the drifting crowd the best I could. I found a dark stoop and watched Ann's lights go on, and after a half hour or so, Jay came out and headed across to the Star. Then one of Ann's lights was blown out, but she kept the bright one nearest the window on.

Smart girl! I thought grudgingly. No tell-tale shadows on her shade!

I moved down my side of the street, crossed up, and came up her side, and darted into her closed stairway. She answered my knock, and she had the gun. I scowled and disregarded it and told her, "I could use some java."

She studied me a minute, then tucked the gun into her skirt band, and went to her small kitchen. She came out with java immediately. It was hot.

I said, "Sit down yonder," and she sat on the edge of the chair as if it were cactus. "I done anything wrong?" I demanded.

"Well . . . no," she admitted. Then she slipped out from under the roughness. "Somebody said something about you, Shorty, but I don't think it's so. What do you want?"

"What did they say?" I asked.

She looked awkward. She made a gesture. "You know the suspicions trouble breeds. We know they're rustlers on the range. We don't know who they are. And you're a stranger."

"Wouldn't have been Satin Latham let

that slip?" I asked. "Don't know who else."

She didn't answer, but I saw the wide spring of her eyes before she dropped her woman's guards. That was all the answer I needed. I let it go. I got down to business.

I said flatly, "This may wreck yore reputation. You've got to take the chance so I can take a chance for you. At quarter to ten tomorrow night, you put on a man's outfit and hat. Tuck up yore hair. Move across them blinds three or four times so the shadow is seen across the street. And . . . stuff yore shirt flat so they think it's a man!"

She crimsoned, but she grinned.

"Every once in awhile you throw yore silhouette like that, up to twelve thirty. Then you move straight toward the lamp and blow it out and don't put on a light again."

I got to my feet. I glared at her and told her, "I don't know why in hell I bother! But yo're worth it."

She didn't smile. She just looked at me, and I could see the shadows gather under her eyes, and then she dropped her head.

"All right, I go," I ground out at her. "But I'll be here by dawn tomorrow alive, or by sundown in a sack!"

I let myself out and banged the door. I was roiled and rough when I hit the street. I crossed the thick dust and found the marshal standing on the edge of the walk, exactly where he'd stand to watch Ann's stairs.

I stopped and glowered at him and snapped, "See all you wanted, Marshal?"

"Yeah," he acknowledged. "Saw and heard. I heard you bang the door."

I moved closer to him. "What's that to you?"

"Plenty," he said, and it was the first time I'd felt any real gumption in him. He said, "I want to tell you something, stranger. Maybe there is plenty I ain't done right in my life, but there's one thing I would, and that's to shoot down any hombre harmed a hair of Ann's head."

"Suppose she wasn't harmed?" I growled.

"That's different. That's her business," he said.

He struck a match with his thumb nail, and we stared at each other across the light. There wasn't any hollowness in his eyes now. They were grim. He meant just what he'd said.

I gave him credit for one remaining decent streak of manhood, and snorted, and moved on toward the Star. Dim, the way you know things a little too late, I knew there'd been somebody in a narrow alley as I passed. I moved into the Star's doorway, then stepped back and looked along the street. I saw a man's figure limping through the shadows.

I cursed to myself and went in wondering if that horse would be waiting for me or not now.

THE Star was still loaded, thick with waving layers of whisky-soaked tobacco smoke, the rise and fall of deep-chested voices, the man-smells of leather and horse and sweat. But the voice of the place had changed. The carnival mood was wearing off, and the tone of the talk was angering, suspicious, grim.

The range was sore at high prices in town, but stuck. There wasn't another town in ninety miles. Every storekeep, every saloon, had the same excuse—they were having to pay equally high. Some had showed their bills.

The gouge had been handled slick, slicker than Blackbeard could have figured it out, which was the best protection he had from suspicion. The assessment wasn't being laid on *after* the storekeeps bought their goods. It was laid on before, and hidden by some middleman. It was impossible to trace. A few supply houses had tried to buck the deal, and learned to their regret that storekeeps, old customers, no longer wanted their goods.

In the course of persuading the merchants to see the light, there had been a little rough work. Not much, but what there was was so violent that not even the victims would talk. What had happened to them could happen to their families, and, worse, they could not for certain identify their assailants. They had come out of the dark, and come from behind. Here and there a clue had been found, but the only law to give it to was the marshal, and he invariably accepted alibis.

There had been trouble on range, and it had been handled just as slick. Rustlers had pecked at herds in such a way that it was argument if it was an organized, professional outfit or not. Much of it looked like the sniping of the ever-present, thieving poor fringe, the shack and soddy dwellers, who never went weak from hunger, although they had no visible means of eating meat. Some of the rustling looked like sheer spite.

Suspicions and retaliation against real and fancied grievances had made every man out for himself, and grab what you could get away with. It didn't sound like there was a man on the range left without dirt on his hands. That worked fine for the rustlers, who went on pecking, seldom very much, but tallying up a husky score.

Of course, there had been the close shaves between rustlers and ranchers. There had been some men honest and brave enough to speak out their thoughts. There had been others who thought they had a trail, or had cut sign on some special person.

They had come to grief before their suspicions could be pinned down. Ann's husband, Fred, killed in a stampede. Rigg and Abe Moses drowned in a flood. Toll Albright left afoot and waterless to die upon the desert. A few like Jay who had survived and learned their bitter lessons and kept their mouths shut.

All through the saloon you picked up the telltale remarks, the hastily lowered voices or clipped off conversations, the suspicious looks. There were plenty, of course, who had their minds on Blackbeard's bunch. But the more personal suspicions and rancor of old feuds broke up any agreement on the tough bunch before it had formed solid.

There was, finally, the fact that, if Blackbeard was the ringleader, he had at least nine tough, gunslinging hombres to side him. You could only guess at how many more. That was a very subduing influence. Blackbeard knew it, and lorded it in saloon and on trail, and his oiled grit laugh and brute eyes mocked the range to take him on.

I didn't make myself any friends from the clear way he included me in his bunch and bought me drinks. But it kept me from a lot of nosey questions. Maybe it kept me out of trouble.

I drank to dawn, but I slopped out a good many of my drinks. I made a few bucks at blackjack, rigged winnings, for I knew it was a crooked deal. I was loaded enough, but not as much as I looked when I drifted up to the hotel. A lot of the boys were checking out. I got myself a bed.

I slept until late. I had breakfast at the Eats. Ann had something on her mind. She was pleasant enough, but stiff. I took the opportunity to ask her if she'd seen Jay. She gave me a wide, still look. She asked why I wanted to know.

I said, "He saw me when I left last night."

She bit her under lip and looked away.

I asked, "What's it matter?"

I was just needling her. I thought she'd answer that it mattered to her. She didn't. She was silent a space, and then she said, "It matters to him."

I thought with contempt that was a helluva funny way to look at things. If it mattered to him so much, he could do something about it. Sure he was crippled, but his gun side wasn't. I said so. She looked sad. She didn't look at me, but she didn't

have anything at all to say in his defense.

I DRIFTED over to the Star and pretended I had the devil's own hangover. The town had pretty well emptied out, but all of Blacky's outfit were hanging around. I had a few drinks that set me up, but I pretended they made me drunker. I let slip a few guarded boasts about this town turning up some pretty nice little ladies. I let go a couple of contemptuous slurs at Jay.

Blacky put two and two together and gave a wicked grin. He nudged me and asked confidentially, "You cutting Jay out of that picture?"

I didn't answer him, but I chuckled. I let them get the idea that I was set. I moved around a lot so it was hard to keep track of how many drinks I'd had. As far as they could see, I was pretty well stoked up by twenty to ten.

I made a man's flimsy excuses when he's going to see a girl and doesn't want to say so and still wants to boast. I lurched on my way and took a roundabout path to Ann's. I was playing cute-dumb. The fresh kid was on my trail, and I knew it. That was just what I wanted.

When the lights of the Eats were out, the entrance to Ann's was black shadow. Right beside it was a narrow space between the buildings, just as dark as her stairway. I came up that side of the street, rolling a little, then swung quickly into the space. I ducked under the stairway and used my gun to thump out sounds like mounting footsteps. Then I waited.

The kid drifted by, whistling low. He stopped a few seconds on the edge of the walk, then moved across the street and faded into the darkness of the hardware stoop. He'd be watching her windows, and that was fine. I made my way cautiously back through the space to the back alley.

I circled the town, and found a pony tethered at the edge of town, but no sign of Jay. I thought he might be hunkered in shadow and I nosed around and gave a few low signals, but didn't raise a smell.

I rode back down a back alley and came through between two buildings afoot. This was down street from Ann's, but I could see her lighted windows. In maybe three minutes, I saw a man's figure, just about my size, silhouetted on her curtains.

I grinned and went back to the pony and picked my way out of town. I had a clear idea of the country's layout, and I rode out to the rock. The night was dark, but there was starlight, and when I saw the solid block of the pinnacle rise ahead, I cut off trail toward its backside and hugged the shadows. When I drew close, I got down and tethered the strange pony to some brush. The pony suddenly tossed its head up, and its ears pricked forward. It gave a low snort. I slapped it on the nose and damned it silently.

I took a line on where it had been looking and moved forward, low and crouched. I was almost atop a pony before I saw it standing motionless beside a boulder. Then I saw a lump of shadow that didn't look like rock. Low to the ground, like a man hunkered. The view from here covered both sides of the pinnacle's approach.

I slipped out my gun and moved forward, using my left hand, in an ape-crouch. I jammed the gun into a man's back and told him curtly, "Don't move, Satin!"

The man didn't move, but I heard him mutter to himself, "Satin!"

I freed his gun, frisked him and stood him up. Then I saw how his body leaned. "What the hell you doing out here, Jay?" I demanded.

I sensed his shame at being caught. Then he straightened and sucked a deep breath and told me grimly, "All right, you'll do what you want anyway. I came out to see what kind of hokus pokus yore up to."

I grunted. "What did you mean to do if you found me in the wrong? What if I'm out here to rustle a little of Miss Ann's stock?"

He sucked a deep breath again. It

rasped. "Then if I can manage I'll find a way to kill you!"

I smelled him out a minute and then snorted a low laugh. I said, "Jay, you mean well. Here's yore gun. Stick around right where you are, and you can see the hokus pokus and tell the town about it. It won't serve bad at that, having me a witness."

"What's the layout?" he asked.

"You just stick right here and watch," I told him. "But don't get to putting around any wild shots."

CHAPTER FOUR

Shoot Out!

I MELTED down into the deep shadows of the rock's base. After a time, I heard the patter of a single horse approaching out of the night. The horseman stopped directly in front of the rock where I couldn't see him.

Satin, I thought, and had half a mind to grab him now. But I didn't have anything on him, except that he was here. So I just waited where I was.

Not long after, maybe ten minutes, fast hoofbeats drummed in from the other direction, stopping abruptly out in the darkness. Satin sent a low hoot out to them. It was answered, twice, and the riders came on. Four of them. They talked low but plain, and it was easy to hear. His first question was if they'd covered their trail out of town. Oh, he was slick and cautious, that one!

Satisfied they had, he said, "All right, now here is what we do. Old Charley's been gathering that stock all week to move it across to Late Basin. He's got it bedded down at the edge of Lizard Flats. He's so blind, he doesn't know that old bell ox is mixed in there. He's so deaf he won't hear anything if we move quiet."

One of the other riders asked gruffly, "What do we do if he ain't that deaf?"

"Shoot him," Satin grunted indifferently. "But it's better if we don't have to. That bell ox is master already. She'll be on her feet for the midnight stretch. If old Charley don't waken, we just drift in and start them moving. Gotch, you start the bell ox going. Just ride beside her until we get the herd started. Frank, you take a fix on the camp in case old Charley's got snorty. Murray you ride drag. Butter, you take the north bulge, and I'll ride south. Just walk 'em. When we get through the pass, we'll line the herd out."

There were grunts and a few questions and then the party started off at a lope. I fell back to where Jay was standing. He said suspiciously, "Thought you were going to raise such hokus pokus?"

"Take yore time boy!" I answered curt. "What pass would they be using?"

He said, "Come up here," and swung into his saddle. I went back and got my pony. We climbed a slope. He pointed to a saddle of low hills not far from us.

"They'll take their time," I said. "How do we get around them without them hearing us?"

He said there was a sandy dry bed ran right into those hills. We took it. At the cutout I told him, "I want Satin first, so I'll let half the herd slide by. I mean to catch him at the crest. You watch from where you want to."

I left him and rode into the pass. Way they'd be travelling, I didn't have to worry about leaving dust smell. A yell, and then two shots broke out of the night behind. I thought somberly, Old Charley! Well, I'd damned well measure blood for that.

I found a place to take my stand at the top of the crest. I wanted a good sharp outline of Satin when I started. The herd came up with the big bell ox leading. Gotch was riding point. My finger was mighty itchy at the silhouette he cut.

I was sucking the herd's dust, and I could feel its heat, I was that close. Then I made out the vague shadow of a horseman. Actually, just a shadow higher than the rest as

yet. I wet my lips and reminded myself that they hadn't given the old man a chance. I splayed my gun hand and flexed it. In dark shooting, you need all the control there is.

My damnfool pony suddenly erupted a loud snort and rumbled. The damned critter knew Satin's pony and caught the smell.

Satin was quick. Quicker than I was. His shadow sank and he put a shot at where he'd heard my pony blow. He gave a yell, a prearranged signal. The herd began to trot, forced from behind. Then it began to crowd and run.

He put another shot at me and I shot back. But this was blind shooting. The herd was growling and putting up a smoke, and there was a racket as the crowding pinched the cattle, and their horns began to knock.

The drag went by, and a shadow blurred through the smoke behind it. I heard Satin's yell, "Come in, Murray!" Beyond the crest, there was a signal shot.

Then it struck me I was boxed. I'd picked a good dark spot to wait, but I couldn't get out of it without silhouetting.

I could hear a pony's hooves striking rock directly opposite. Satin was taking cover, and he knew this pass. I had maybe thirty seconds to use the dust-smoke as cover to get out, and they would damn well chase me. It was their country, and I wasn't like to reach town. If I did, they'd frame me and halter me before Jay got time to round up the tougher ranchers and bring them in to help—if he had the guts. So, like many another brave man, I holed up to shoot it out because there was nothing else to do.

A horse came back fast through the filtering dust. I took a shot and scored the horse, but missed the man. He didn't spill. Orange red flame jabbed out of the rocks opposite. Once, twice. Then two guns at the same time. Two more riders were coming over the crest.

I couldn't waste bullets now, and I had to think of five guns, not just Satin. I crouched low and beaded on the crest. I shot three times and pitched one man from his saddle. A hail of fire came at me.

I HAD some space to move in and shifted position while I loaded. I was in a rock nest, and the place was buzzing with ricochets. The final rider came over the pass, and I dropped his pony, but heard the rider cursing as he spilled clear.

I held my gun ready for snap shots, and shot straight into the jabbing tongues of fire. It was a hot night anyway, and the herd had left its heat crowding this narrows, and the sweat was streaming from under my hat and down my back.

My hat slapped off, and I answered that shot and heard a man's howl. The sound swelled until it would split your ear drums, curled, and broke off. My lips flattened out in a wicked grin, and I rolled for a different spot.

A hail of shot whined into the place where I had been. I picked one gun to answer, and heard a curse. There was a muttered question I didn't catch, but I heard the clatter as the man's gun fell onto a rock.

Then I heard Satin's harsh command, "Then shoot with your left, damn it!" and a fresh burst of fire broke at me. I still had three men on me. Worse, I was running out of powder. Damned fool that I was, I hadn't brought extra. These hombres had come prepared for a run in. They rode heavy.

More than the heat was bringing the sweat out on my forehead now. I had to make every shot count. I was shooting slow, and that was how I came to notice a man's grated curse of pain at a time I hadn't shot, although I hadn't heard the sound because they were pouring in the lead.

Satin yelled something, and the next two tongues of fire were slanted upward at the rocks right above me. I heard the answer-

ing shot whining sharply above me then.

It is funny how a man's mind works in battle. For an instant that might have been a second, or a whole minute, I wasn't thinking of my own spot. I was just numb with downright surprise. Jay, the weak-gutted, self-pitying cripple, was siding me! I gave a whoop and put two shots slamming in. I made one count, but not enough. The third one counted, and just then Jay dropped down beside me trembling like a leaf and so damned scared he couldn't twist words out of his mouth. But he was fighting.

I said, "We've got two to go, and I think one's wounded. But they've got more powder than we have. We'll have to belly over and put it right square at 'em in their faces. You take the left. I want Satin!"

"When do we shoot?" he managed to rasp out of fright, and I am damned glad that he asked it. We'd have been in a helluva fix if he'd let go a spooked shot while we were crossing through the open trail.

"When you can smell 'em or their lead singes yore whiskers, I told him, and threw myself on my belly and started crawling.

They didn't get wise until we were out on the trail. They were too busy loading and shooting. Then they must have both been loading at once and caught a grunt from Jay. Crippled as he was, I guess it was hard crawling.

I heard Satin curse, and then the slam of his broken gun and a bullet burned under my chest, and another picked off a spur. I came to a running crouch with a whoop, and raced forward yelling, "Here we come, Johnny Jones!"

I got belted in the left shoulder, and my shot went wild for that one, but I saw Satin's face in the flash, and I piled straight in on him, triggering as fast as I could. I caught the heat of his fire and went blind a second, and I knew my gun was empty, and I had the thought, *Now I'm done!* and the other thought that was always there, Why in hell hadn't I learned to keep clear of trouble?

I threw myself to load up my last few bullets if I had a chance. I had three left, and I had already loaded before it struck me that the pass was oddly quiet of a sudden. There was only a whimpering kind of breathing on my left, and a slow, thick, gurgling sound from the rocks directly in front of me. I crawled up there cautiously. Starlight put its pale shine on Satin's gun, and it didn't move. There was a heap of solid shadow there, and when I got real close, I saw he had pitched forward. He wasn't dead yet, but he was safe. A man doesn't live long with those gurgles.

A hoarse whisper rasped out of darkness, "Who's there?"

It was Jay, and he was near to blowing his top with panic. He knew somebody was left, and he was scared plumb witless that it was Satin.

I stood up and called, "Don't worry. We've got' em tallied. We licked 'em."

You'd think that would buck a man up. It didn't. If a growed man can bawl, then that is what he did. I was plumb disgusted with him, in spite of the help he'd been.

I went and got my canteen and gave him a drink. In five minutes or so he got hold of himself enough to listen. He'd been shot up a little, but all on his left side where it didn't matter. Me, I was creased all over, but too damned stoked up to feel it.

I thought of Blacky and the remaining boys back in town. Right now, they owned the town. All the ranch crowd had cleared out. If we walked back in without help, we'd have to fight it out with them. I didn't think that we were able. I knew damned well Jay wasn't.

I told him to ride and send somebody for the sheriff and somebody to collect the corpses, and then to round up three or four solid ranchers' and their crews. Make it fast, and I'd meet him at dawn at the Star, and if they felt like it, the ranchers would clean up the rest of the snake nest.

I didn't say so, but I didn't give a damn now what they did. I'd done my job and

I was through. All I wanted was the reward.

WE GOT asaddle and rode down to a fork and split. I headed straight back for town. I came down Ann's back alley and used the space between the buildings to come through and whipped around into her stairway and went up quiet as a man could.

I gave my rap, and she answered with her gun. She was still dressed like a man and looked mighty cute. She stepped back away from me step by step as I came in, a mixture of disbelief and gratitude and other things moving like dark clouds through her expression.

She put down the gun and leaned her hips back against the table that had stopped her. She hadn't taken her eyes off mine once.

I said, "Well, yore cows are safe, and I reckon the whole range will be a little safer too. It was Satin."

She straightened then, and her forearms came out to me, but her hands made fists. She closed her eyes, and her whole body strained, and she must have damned near bit through her lip. Then the wind dumped out of her, and she went slack. She dropped her face, and color, deep color, stained clear down onto her shoulders. I guess she was thinking of what came next.

She shook the thoughts from her and said, "You need attention," and went out to the kitchen. She'd kept java hot, and she laced it with whisky. She put water on to heat to clean me up, and she found me a cigar, and she flipped up some vittles while I was resting.

I drank and ate and drank some more, and then she cleaned me up. I wasn't as bad off as I looked. I was covered with blood and dirt, but the pop in the shoulder was the only bad wound, and the bullet had dug its own way out.

She fixed me clean and pretty, and then she brought another glass and poured two drinks. She raised her glass to mine. She toasted, "To the victor!"

There was absolutely no color at all in her face now. Her eyes were steady, but they looked like black pools of a dark night against a white desert. She was breathing deep, but her lips were thin. There was no swell in them, and there was no joy and no excitement at the corners.

I didn't drink. I said, "You look happy as a corpse! Have I done what I said?"

She told me low, but on a dead note, "I'll do what I said."

I put the glass down. I was still full of fight's fire and this was a fresh roil. I said, "Wait a minute, Ann, I had an idea the first time or two you kind of liked me for myself."

She said, "It isn't that."

"What the hell is it?" I growled.

She dropped her face and bit her lip again. She said, "Would you do me one

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last favor? That's all I ask. One favor."

"What?" I demanded. I wasn't feeling generous.

"Let me send Jay away first," she murmured.

I stared at her. "What the hell has he got to do with it? He wouldn't even know!"

"He would," she said. "Because I'd have to tell him."

I cursed. I cursed *her*. Up and down and around Hellhole Canyon. "You mean yo're that much in love with that lamed dog?" I rasped.

She forced her face up to look square at me. "I've never had any other man since Fred. I've never had Jay even. We'd have been married except for his accident. He wouldn't ask me after that."

I cursed some more. I tore the glass out of her hand and drank it off. I drank my own. I slambanged around barking out the things a man says when a woman tells him honest that she'd prefer another man to him. She made me feel like a babe in a honkytonk, being bought and paid for.

"Just let me send him away first," she said again. "Maybe I'll feel different then. I won't have to deceive him, and I won't have to hurt him . . . this much."

I grated, "You don't need to send him nowhere!" I slammed on my hat and grabbed her gun and stuck it in my belt. Dawn was a rose and yellow flush out through her back window. I kicked a chair aside as I moved to the door.

I stood with the door half open and looked back at her, and I was feeling ugly. I said, "This is the gol damndest payoff any man ever got for almost getting kilt!"

She looked guilty. "Shorty, can't you understand?" she quavered.

"I understand all right!" I bit out. "Yore in love with a half-strung galoot, and you want a husband. What I'd get would be a lot of ice! All right, I'll get you yore husband and throw him into the bargain and you can keep the payoff!"

Something happened to her. All of the stiffness, all of the somberness, all of the frost, washed out of her. Her lips came full and she called as I turned, "Shorty . . ."

I turned back. I don't know why. She came toward me and put her arms around my neck and kissed me, and anything that a woman might ever hold for a man was in that kiss. She murmured, "You're a really good and gentle man, Shorty!"

I stared at her. "You want to pay off?"

"I haven't welched," she said. She colored this time. Her eyes were sad but held high, and her mouth was full and warm.

I just kept on staring. I guess I don't know women. All I could think was, "If she has that warmth to offer me, what kind of a fire would she hold for a man she really loved?"

I walked back to the table and poured us out two drinks. She raised her glass. She was nervous, but the hardness did not come back into her.

I waved my glass and said, "Ann, to your happy marriage!"

WE DRANK, and I patted her neck and walked out. I guess I don't understand myself either.

I walked across to the Star. Three or four overnight boys were asleep on tables. Blacky and his crew were playing poker. The marshal was there, leaning on the bar and chewing at his mustaches. And Jay was there, all freshened up!

I walked up to him, and he thought I'd come for information. He said low, "They're gathering. They'll be in soon."

The drum of hoofbeats coming into town bore him out. Blackbeard lifted his head to listen.

I said to Jay, "To hell with the help. Let's settle this ourselves."

I could see the uncertainty, the fear of his own failure, strain through his eyes. He gulped and licked his lips.

"Don't you know what you did tonight?" I growled.

"It wasn't much but luck," he said.

I said, "Brother, you shot Satin Latham!"

His mouth fell open. He didn't believe it.

"It was yore shot," I told him, "because my gun was empty." It was a lie, but he'd never know that.

I watched the strange thing happen inside of him. The rebirth of confidence and pride. He straightened. His mouth went firm, and his jaws angled, and a hard fire came into his eyes. He nodded he'd side me, and I had the feeling that I was being sided by a man.

The marshal had overheard. He came close and demanded, "What's that?"

I thought a second and then I told him, "Your boss Satin is dead. Shot face to face and four square by Jay here for rustling. Him and four more of Blackbeard's pack."

Lights came and went through the hollowness of the marshal's eyes. Then his eyes were solid, and his mouth had lost its looseness. He'd smelled out our intentions. He said, "I'm with you," and there was another man got his chance at manhood.

We moved down on Blacky. His five men were all bunched with him. They didn't expect trouble from us, but they were watchful. Then Blackbeard caught trouble smell and came up out of his chair. "What is this?" he demanded.

The marshal said, "Blacky, yo're through. Get out of town while you've got the chance."

Blackbeard stared as if it were a bad joke. "What?" he boomed.

I said, "Satin's dead. So are yore dogs who were with him." I jerked my head sidewise. "Jay here and me caught 'em rustling and shot 'em down."

He looked angry and disbelieving, and then the smell of truth got through to him. He stood motionless. He listened to the drum of those incoming hoofbeats, and of another wave behind them.

He cursed once, but his voice was hollow. He gave one final probing glare at Jay, and read the mettle in his eye, and of a sudden, Blacky didn't look so big or tough.

He said, "Well, it was a good play while it lasted. I told that arrogant damnfool he should of took me along!"

He pivoted and jerked his head at his hardcase men. "Reckon we ride, boys. Reckon we'd best use the side door."

They uncoiled fast. They were piling out before the first ranchers drew rein.

There were spots of red on Jay's gaunt cheeks, and a boyish smile of surprise was wavering on his mouth. "That easy?" he murmured, as if asking himself. "All it takes is the guts to face it!"

I nodded, "That easy, Jay. But you got to time it. I wouldn't let no more time go wasting in other directions."

He said, "Yo're right," and grinned his thanks, and stuck out a hand of real and solid friendship.

I could still feel the press of his hand as I rode out. I could still feel the warmth of Ann's mouth. The marshal, too, he was pretty grateful.

Kind of nice to know you've got three solid friends like that behind you. Even if you'll never need them. Even when you know you'll never have nothing more to do with trouble. ★ ★ ★

On the day that Henry "Red" Dawson was to be sentenced, the judge, it was rumored, had sworn to throw the book at him, and he did. "For aiding murder and cattle rustling, ninety-nine years," the judge intoned. "For kidnapping, ninety-nine years. Shooting Amos Landry, ninety-nine years. Stealing a set of harness, ninety-nine years. Disturbing the peace ten times, ninety-nine years, each. Total sentence, 1386 years!" The judge paused. "However," he continued, "since you are the sole support of your widowed mother, the sentence is suspended!"

"This is private business," Bode said. "Get the hell out!"

Sharp Shooting Siren

No man dared make a fool of Bode Belkner—until gorgeous Karen and the man she loved wanted each other more than life itself—in somebody else's arms!

By Cy Kees

WHEN the thunderheads rolled closer, darkness settled fast, and the cabin seemed lonelier than ever. The rushing wind died slowly, and Karen Saunders dreaded the moment when it would start its sad moan in the rafters. The

wind's dismal music always made her feel more alone, gave her the depressing feeling that things weren't right. Trying not to listen, Karen studied the cabin for odd chores to occupy her mind.

But there was nothing to do that she hadn't already done over and over. When her father was alive, his illness had demanded attention, had taken the slowness out of the days. But now the wind rustled past his week-old grave, and with him were his hopes of a robust and fuller life in this desolate wilderness. Shaking her head, Karen crossed the room and dippered water on potatoes and started peeling them.

It seemed like a useless waste of time, and food. She wasn't hungry. It struck her suddenly, she didn't know what she was going to do. At the age of twenty, she had no place to go, no future. Outside the thunder rumbled closer, than quieted. The wind died suddenly, leaving a hushed silence.

The stillness depressed her even more, and Karen dropped the potato she was peeling. Maybe some day she would meet someone who would help her build a future, she thought. But who it would be she had no way of knowing. The wandering life she had lived with her father had given her no real chance to meet him. Karen sighed.

If she would only be very beautiful, it would make things easier. She wasn't even pretty, Karen thought. But her figure was fully developed, and the men she had met were attracted to her. They seemed to sense the womanly warmth, the deep feeling for men that she tried so hard to hide. But she couldn't hide the warmth in her dark eyes, and, when they saw it, they knew, and there wasn't much she could do about that. Except for Bode Belkner, they had always treated her with respect, because she would never be a cheap woman and tried to leave no doubt about it in anyone's mind. She didn't flirt or try to draw men with feminine tricks just for the fun of it. She had been born warm-blooded, and there wasn't much she could ever hope to do about that.

The thunder pounded heavily, shaking the single lamp on the rough pine table. Karen breathed faster, wishing the rain would come so she would know the storm was nearly over. Besides, she would be able to relax then, knowing that Bode Belkner wouldn't ride over from his sprawling ranchhouse in a downpour.

Fear slivered through her, like it always did when she thought of the big, cold-eyed rancher. Every time he had been near her, she could sense the evil in him, something ugly and hidden that had nothing to do with his arrogance, his roughness. He would know she was alone now, and he would be thinking of her. Karen shivered while the first of the rain spattered on the shake roof. Drawing closer to the black cookstove, she picked up wood to refill it. A soft rap sounded on the door, and she froze, the wood chunk hanging forgotten in her hand.

The knock sounded again, louder now. Breathing fast, Karen looked wildly around wanting only to hide until he went away. She had no gun, no weapon to protect herself with. Even the barred door was no protection. If Bode Belkner wanted inside, there was no way to stop him. Swallowing, Karen forced her feet to the door and opened it.

A tall stranger stood there, looking bleak and wet in the dim light. He swept off his hat, and rivulets of water streamed from its brim. He smiled.

"I saw your light and thought maybe—" He glanced behind her into the empty room. "I didn't mean to startle you, Miss. Are you here alone?"

Karen nodded. Hearing his quiet tones, the wild fear left her, and she managed a smile. Having expected Bode Belkner, this man was a welcome sight, even if he was a total stranger. She stepped back. "Won't you come in?"

"I don't guess I'd better." He faded back and the heavy rain hit suddenly

on his faded mackinaw. He was soaked. "But if you don't mind, I'll get under a roof out here," he said, glancing at the black outline of the barn.

"But you're wet," Karen protested. "And you must be hungry. At least come in and get dry."

This time when he smiled, his hard gray eyes warmed a little. "All right, if you say. I'll put up my horse first." Turning, he walked to his saddled horse, which stood quietly under the pelting rain.

"First stall through the door on the left," Karen said. "There's hay in the manger."

"That'll sound good in this horse's ears," the man said, with a soft chuckle. "He's powerful hungry."

TURNING away from the door, Karen hurried to fire up the stove. The flames caught hold fast on the pitchy chunks and roared through the chimney. Resisting an impulse to look at herself in the cracked mirror over the wash basin, Karen went back to peeling potatoes.

Her hands trembled, and she guessed it was from having been so afraid. Strangely she wasn't uneasy at the thought of being alone with the man. Karen smiled. Maybe her confidence was due to his willingness to retreat to the cold dampness of the barn so she wouldn't be bothered with him. Anyhow, she trusted him, and his presence gave her the first feeling of real security that she had known for a long time.

Across the room the door opened, then closed again. Glancing over, Karen watched him peel off the mackinaw and stand close to the roaring fire. Right away, she noted the twin sixguns flanking lean hips. Intuitively she knew they were tools and not worn for show. When she caught his eye a wide smile parted his face.

"About an hour ago I was blaming my luck for being caught in the storm. Which just goes to show you shouldn't holler before you're hurt." He half turned to face her squarely. "What's your name?"

"Karen Saunders." Relief swept though her that she had been able to keep a trembling note out of her voice. She tried to study him without his noticing it, to find out why he affected her so oddly. But she could find no reason.

There was nothing especially attractive about his tall lean figure, especially since his faded range clothes were limp and sodden. There was strength in his tanned face with its strong jaw, but he wasn't especially handsome. The feeling she had must come from his eyes, Karen decided, the hard gray eyes which turned strangely soft when he looked at her.

"You can call me Duane," he said. Glancing at the barred door, he unbuckled the two sixguns casing his hips and carried them to a corner. "Was headed north until I ran into this downpour." For a few seconds weary lines settled on his face, as if he might wish he had already reached his goal, wherever it was. Then he turned back to the stove's welcome heat.

"As soon as you get dried out, I'll have supper ready," Karen said, hurrying the potatoes to the stove.

While she cooked the meal, she grew more tense, too aware of Duane's nearness by her at the stove. When they had finished eating, he started questioning her, cautiously at first until he saw that she welcomed his interest. Gradually she found herself telling him everything about the life with her father, her uncertainty of the future.

Of his own past or his future plans, Duane said nothing. It was late when he finally pushed his chair back from the table.

"I'm sorry I kept you up so long, Karen," he said. "But it's been a long time since I had a chance to sit quiet and talk with someone."

"I did all the talking, I'm afraid," Karen said, smiling.

If Duane saw an invitation in this to talk about himself, he didn't take advantage of it. Going to the corner, he picked up the twin sixguns and strapped them into place.

Karen noted the studied exactness in the way he adjusted the holsters against his thighs and tied them down. Then he shrugged into the mackinaw, which had been drying near the kitchen stove. When he opened the door, he paused, glancing at her.

"I'll see you again in the morning. This —I think is the most wonderful evening I ever had." His gray eyes glowed, oddly soft in contrast to the hardness of his appearance. "Good night, Karen."

"Good night," she said, wanting to offer him blankets for his night's sleep, but afraid to trust her voice to say it. She forced herself to say, "I was happy you were here, Duane. It's kind of . . . lonely here by myself."

"You shouldn't have to live alone, ever," he said quietly, and the door closed behind him. Karen stared at it for a long time before she walked over and dropped its bar into place.

She might have been a fool to let Duane know how much she liked his company, she thought. But still, somehow, she was glad that she had. Although it seemed silly in a way to think so, she sensed that he had craved company as much as she had, that he too might be lonely. Still thinking of him, she washed and dried the dishes. For once tonight it seemed more like a pleasure than a chore.

Then abruptly, a loud knock sounded at the door.

KAREN tensed, wondering what it could mean. Maybe she had misjudged the tall, bleak Duane. Instantly she put the thought from her mind. Taking a deep breath, she unbarred the door.

It took her a few seconds to make out the burly figure in the doorway. Then thin chills slivered up her spine, and she backed away, her breath coming faster, in quick gasps.

"Bode," she said, through clenched teeth. "W—what are you doing here?"

"Evening, Miss Saunders." There was a sneer in the way he said the words, and without being asked, Bode Belkner strode into the room, letting the door swing shut behind him. His cold eyes swept the room, and Karen knew he was making sure she was alone. Her heart hammered, but she tried to recover her poise and meet his knowing eyes.

"I'm tired, Bode," she said, unable to keep a quiver out of her voice. "If you don't mind, I—I'd rather visit some other time."

"After I rode all the way over here in the rain?" Belkner's thick lips curled in a grin. Taking off his battered black hat, he sailed it into a corner. "That doesn't sound very neighborly, you know. Leastways you could let me warm up before I go back."

Karen swallowed. "I'm sorry, Bode. Of course you can." Keeping as far from him as possible, she retreated to the stove and refilled it with wood. "Here, I'll fire up for you."

"Well, thanks," he said, chuckling. But he made no move to go closer to the stove, eyeing her every second. "Been kind of busy, or I'd been over sooner. Was right sorry to hear about your father."

"Thank you, Bode." There had been real sympathy in his voice, and Karen relaxed a little, scolding herself mentally for being so scared. Then she spied the speculative glitter in his half-closed eyes, and renewed fear swept over her. Bode had mentioned that because he'd almost had to, she thought, and now his thoughts were on her again. He sidled closer to her, and she edged away, trying to stifle her rising panic.

"Now that you're alone, you'll need somebody to take care of you," he said softly, huskily. "Maybe you won't see it right away, Karen, but I'm just the man to do it."

"No," she said, stifling a sudden impulse to scream. "I'm sorry, Bode, but I don't . . . know you well enough."

Bode Belkner grinned, eyes almost closed

as he kept his stare on her. "I can't think of a better time to get acquainted than right now." With slow short steps he walked toward her, arms opening to close her in.

Anger lanced through her, along with her fear, and it bolstered her. Glaring defiantly, Karen stood fast, and Bode stopped. "Are you showing me how brave you are, Bode?" she asked quietly.

Right away, Karen knew that had been the wrong thing to say. The evil that he had always managed to hide from her showed now in the twisted lines of his face. His thick lips curled into a brutal knot.

"We'll see just how damned smart you are!" Crouching lower, he lunged at her.

At the last instant, Karen twisted away, driven to speed by her blind panic. His rough hand brushed her arm, but she jerked away and fled toward the door. His heavy steps pounded right behind her, and she knew she wouldn't make it.

Desperately she pulled the door open, and rushed into the night. Bode's heavy hand closed over her wrist, and his closing fingers trapped her arm beyond escape. Jerking hard, Karen tried to twist away, but he was too strong. With her last thin hope, Karen screamed toward the black hulk of the barn.

His harsh breath whistling through his teeth, Bode dragged her back through the doorway and closed the door. Gripping both her arms, he shoved her violently across the room, to the floor.

She was beaten. Karen didn't look up, but she could hear his slow steps coming closer. It was too late to try to reason, too late to cry. She had defied him, and she had lost. Bode stopped, very close to her.

"I was going to try to get along with you, Karen," he said, his voice cold and flat. "You always treated me like dirt under your feet, but I was going to try. I wanted you to like me." Bode laughed, a grating sound in the stillness. "Now to hell with you, I'm the boss."

"You'll have to argue with me about that," said a soft voice from the doorway.

Stiffening, Bode wheeled, while Karen's heart beat wildly with new hope. And with new fear—not for herself now but for the tall, bleak rider standing there. Bode's hand inched toward the Colt in the holster on his right hip.

"This is private business, mister," he said coldly. "Better keep your nose out of it."

"Maybe we ought to ask her about that."

Karen waited. But neither of them looked at her as they eyed each other with the same close intensity. Duane's gray eyes were icy now, hard, and the tips of his fingers tapped softly on the wide gunbelts around his middle. Tension mounted in the room, and Karen moved to the side, out of Duane's line of fire if the guns would be drawn.

IT WAS a waiting game, and Karen guessed Bode was getting the worst of it. Duane stood relaxed, only his steady eyes and ready hands showing his vigilance. Indecision twisted Bode restlessly and it grew as the slow seconds dragged. Finally Bode glared.

"I said this is private business," he said irritably. "Get the hell out of here."

A soft laugh answered him. Then slowly, the man called Duane started toward Bode. The gap between them closed with relentless sureness. Cursing, Bode slapped at his gun—but it was too late!

Duane's left hand lashed out, and the gun skittered across the floor. Karen stood frozen, fascinated by the quickness, the deadly fighting efficiency in the man called Duane.

Stepping back, Bode tried to get up his guard. But Duane's quick fists lanced through it, the blows splatting with a sickening sharpness. Then down to one knee, Bode bleated in sudden terror and dropped his hands.

"You're leaving now," Duane said. His voice was a low murmur, but it left no room for argument.

Bode nodded. Blood streamed from his smashed nose, and his breath came in harsh gasps. Lurching to his feet, he made for the door, not even stopping for his gun which was still lying in the corner. A little later they heard hoofbeats fading into the stormy night.

Gradually, Karen relaxed. Duane turned to face her, his gray eyes troubled. "You had trouble with him before?"

"Nothing like this." Karen tensed, a new worry rising in her. "Bode will want revenge. He'll come back."

"Yeah, I know. A man like that can't stand having his head beat down." Duane smiled at her, his eyes warm again as they gazed at her. "Don't worry about it, Karen. I'll be waiting."

Long into the night, Karen remembered those words. They haunted her until she lay wide-awake, trembling. He would be waiting, Duane had said. And Bode would be back to avenge the beating he had taken. Somehow she had to stop that meeting from taking place. Karen bunched the pillow around her head to shut out the melancholy sigh of the wind in the rafters.

There had been a quiet confidence in Duane's voice when he had said he'd be waiting for Bode. But Duane didn't know the burly rancher as she did, Karen thought. When Bode came back, he would bring plenty of help. And he wouldn't hesitate to use treachery to down the man who had shamed him. There was evil deep in Bode Belkner, and it would be used against Duane. Knowing it was useless to try to sleep, Karen got up again and relit the lamp.

Suddenly, standing in the soft light, she knew what she could do, what she had to do. If she left here, Duane would no longer feel responsible for her, could continue on his journey north. When Bode Belkner came storming over from his cattle ranch to get his revenge, he would find her place deserted. For a long time, Karen stood still in the middle of the cabin, wondering whether it was what she should do.

There had never been anything for her here, really. Karen sighed. That is, not before the tall, gray-eyed Duane had ridden in out of the storm. Karen knew then why she was hesitating to leave, and she frowned, in deep thought.

For all the mystery about him, she admitted to herself, Duane had found a place in her heart. It was such a sudden thing that it would take more thought, much more, to know why. But it didn't make her feel less that Duane was the man she had waited for, her choice as a mate. Sighing, Karen rebuilt the fire to take the damp chill out of the cabin room.

It would be easier to decide what to do, Karen thought, if Duane had not shown so plainly his interest in her. There was something hard, dangerous about him, but whenever he had looked at her, his gray eyes had melted. And there had been a tone of special tenderness in his voice when he had spoken to her.

"But he'll die if I stay," Karen said dully, to the lonely cabin.

Instinctively she knew Bode would have all the odds stacked in his own favor before he'd dare fight Duane. And for that reason, Duane would die. Finally, Karen admitted it to herself. She had no choice. She would have to leave as soon as possible. Knowing she would find no way to argue herself out of it, she found her small traveling trunk.

There wasn't much to pack. With everything she wanted to take along in the single trunk, there was still plenty of empty space.

Snapping the lid shut, Karen sat down on the trunk and started to cry.

In a way it seemed foolish to be sad about leaving. But as soon as promise of a fascinating new life had shown itself, she was forced to flee. Karen remembered all the long and lonely years when she had waited so hopefully for someone like the man called Duane. It was like being handed some long cherished dream, only to have it snatched away at the last second. Karen

stood up, wiping tears resolutely from her cheeks.

RAIN sounded on the shake roof when she awoke. The dismal thought of leaving hit her right away in the defenseless moment of awakening. But she braced herself against the impulse to weaken and arose quickly to make breakfast.

It was long ready before Duane strolled into the cabin. He was clean shaven, Karen noted. The sight both pleased and depressed her. A man wanted very much for a girl to like him if he troubled to shave in a chilly barn with cold water. But this proof of his interest only made it the harder to leave. Karen waited until he finished breakfast to tell him.

"I've been planning for some time to leave here," she said carefully, so he wouldn't suspect her real reason for going. "I've decided to go today. The bills we owe will just about cover what I could get for the ranch, so I'm turning it over to the sheriff. But you can stay here as long as you like," she added quickly, knowing he would leave if she did. "It'll probably be a couple of weeks before any one will want to move in."

A long silence followed. Almost afraid to look at him, Karen glanced at him and then turned quickly away.

"It's odd, you didn't say anything about that last night," Duane said slowly, his voice strained. "The way you talked, you didn't have any idea of what you were going to do."

"I don't really." Karen searched her mind for the right words. "I only know I want to leave here as soon as possible."

"Why?"

The simplicity of the question confused her. Swallowing, Karen turned and looked right at him. "You should know, Duane, there's nothing here for me."

Somehow she managed to meet his eyes while he gazed at her. "For years I've been marshal of a trail end town down in Kansas," he said. "My life has depended on my knowing how to judge people. I've gotten so I'm sure I can read a person." Smiling, he stood up and came close to her, very close. "Are you really sure there's nothing here for you, Karen?"

Her heart hammered at his nearness, and Karen didn't dare look up at his face. Desperately, she thought of him down and bleeding from treacherous revenge bullets. The thought bolstered her when nothing else could have. Shaking her head, she backed away. "I'm sure, Duane, there's nothing here for me," she said, somehow managing to keep her voice steady.

Duane paled, and his shoulders slumped, as if he was suddenly very tired. "I'm sorry, Karen," he said unhappily. "I guess I made a fool of myself."

Karen wanted to say something to soothe his feelings, but she didn't trust her voice.

"I'll wait around till you go," he said, his voice flat, bleak. "Might just be. . . ."

His voice trailed off, and he went on out of the door. Karen guessed what he had been going to say. It might be that Bode Belkner would show up this morning. As burning as he would be for revenge, he would be hard put to wait.

The thought made her panic, and she ran toward the door. "Duane, would you mind saddling my horse for me?" she called after him. "If . . . if I get into town right away I can catch the morning train."

"Yeah, I'll be glad to."

After his brief stay in the room, the cabin seemed lonelier than ever, after she turned back into the room. Karen forced herself to think calmly. No matter how much she wanted to, she didn't dare tell Duane why she was leaving. He would refuse to leave then, or might even go over after Bode Belkner. His duties as a town marshal would have made him fearless of men like Bode. Frowning, Karen gathered the last of her belongings into her trunk. Duane just didn't know Bode as she herself did.

Maybe after she was sure Duane was

safe from Bode, she could manage to meet him again. But Karen sensed the impossibility of that. And after the way she had rebuffed him, Duane might not ever be anxious to see her again. Blinking back tears, Karen carried her trunk to the porch outside. Then she heard the harsh voices, down by the corral.

THE sight of them chilled her, and she moaned through set teeth. Duane's hands were in the air, and the two mounted men had guns lined squarely at him. In the saddle, Bode Belkner looked burlier than ever. And the man with him was Ed Lampson, Bode's overgrown foreman. Somehow they had sneaked up and caught him when he wasn't watching for them.

Probably while Duane was wondering why she was so hostile to him after he had saved her, Karen thought bitterly. It was her fault. Bode's thick voice came clearly over the thin morning air.

"Now you'll get a chance to see how it feels to crawl in front of that gal," he said hoarsely. "Nobody gets in my way when I want a woman."

"Go to hell," Duane said. His voice was soft, almost pleasant. "You shoot and I won't do any crawling for sure." He laughed. "And you think you can make me crawl, huh?"

Frantic with fear, Karen retreated back into the house and eyed them through the back window. Duane backed steadily toward the house, and they followed on their horses, covering him with two guns every step. Karen knew Duane's gray eyes would be on them every inch of the way, hoping for some opening so he could draw and fire.

Within fifty feet of the house, Ed Lampson started shifting uneasily in the saddle. "You blamed sure she ain't got a gun lined on our bellies?"

"No, if she had one, she'd have used it last night," Bode said, with a twisted grin.

"Don't forget you left a gun in there last night," Duane said, chuckling.

Bode's gun! A wild ray of hope flashed through her, and Karen darted toward the far corner of the cabin.

Gripping the heavy Colt in both hands, she darted back to the window. She eared back the heavy hammer, aimed it straight at Bode Belkner through the window. Then she dropped the hammer.

The Colt bucked heavily in her hands and shattered window glass dropped to the floor. The slug hit flesh with a solid slap, and Karen peered anxiously through the broken window. Ed Lampson's horse was down with the big foreman pinned under. Then other guns were crashing, hellishly loud in the thin morning air.

Abruptly the guns silenced again, and only the rolling echoes of the reports came from the surrounding hills. Karen forced herself to look.

Calmly ejecting shells from the twin six shooters, Duane stood a short distance from two motionless figures.

Karen took a deep breath, forcing a calm she didn't feel. Then she walked on out of the door. Duane met her half way. His gray eyes were sober now, but his hands were as steady as ever when he dropped the twin sixguns back into their holsters.

"You sure helped me out, Karen," he said gently. "I needed that help." He started to turn away. "You can leave without worrying now. I'll see that all this is straightened out with the law before I move on north."

"I'm not going," Karen blurted. Hot blood rushed to her face, but she knew she must tell him. "I—the only reason I said I was going was because . . . because I love you," she said slowly, looking right at the glowing warmth in his gray eyes.

Smiling, Duane came closer, and she welcomed his opened arms. "I was going north to find a home," he murmured. "It's terribly lonely being marshal of a town." His strong arms held her even closer. "I'm sure glad I came this way, Karen, because . . . it looks like I found one." ★ ★ ★

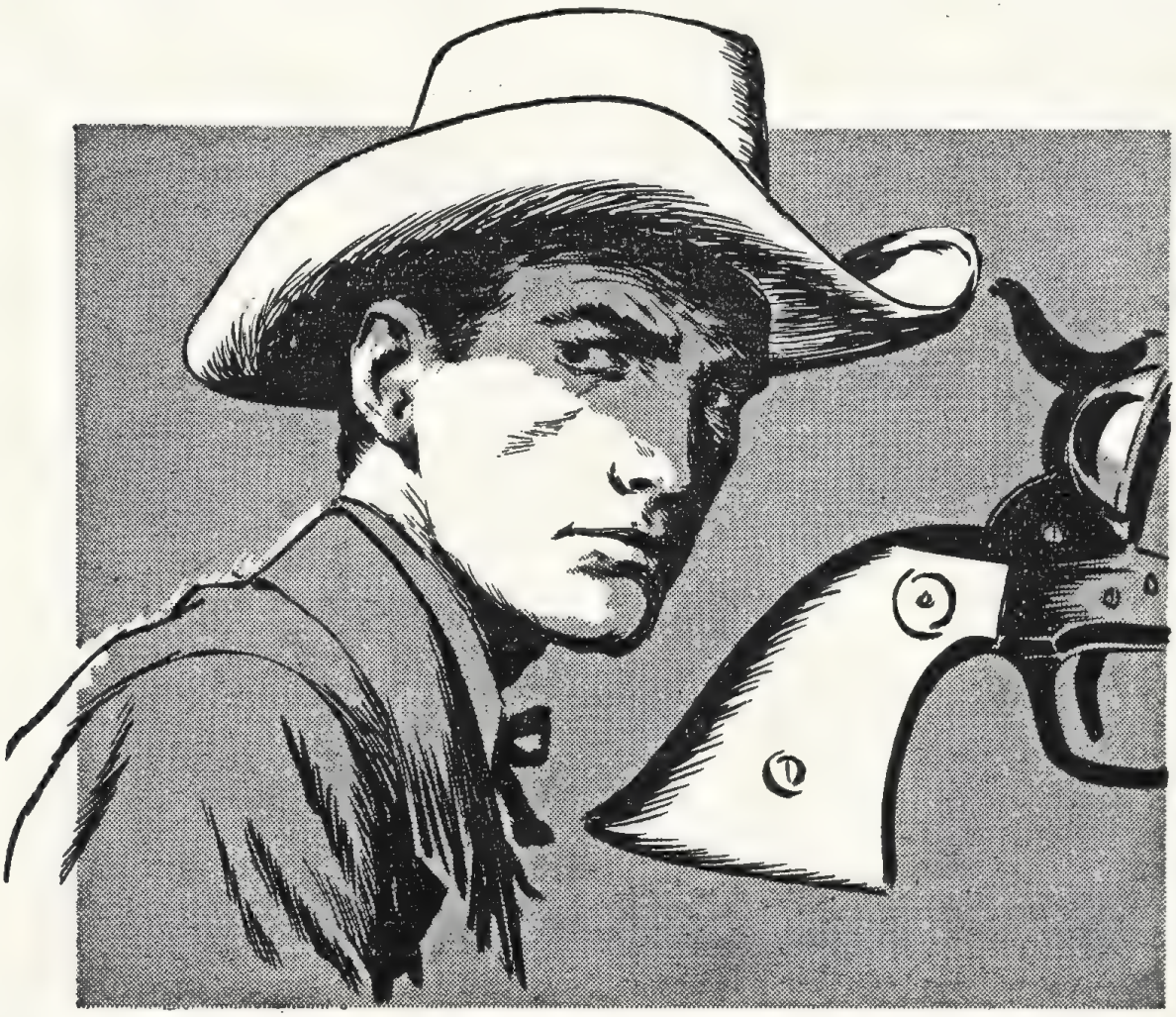
WILDCAT ON THE PROD!

IT WAS dusk when they topped the hill overlooking Wineglass, pausing to rest their horses before making the last winding dash off of the slope and into the town. Lamplight streamed from the shop windows in pale streaks, and riders pounded into town, pulling into the tie-rails that lined each side of Custer Street.

Bert Kerry glanced at his friend and shoved his best hat to the back of his head. He took a cigar from the breast pocket of his suit coat and licked it into shape, one leg hooked around the saddle horn. "Sure is pretty this time of night, ain't it?"

The other man shot him a quick, half-believing glance and murmured, "Just gotta pull the lion's tail, don't ya?" He was tall in the saddle and wire thin with almost no waist. His cheeks were long and sunken, and his blond hair was bleached white against the darkness of his skin.

"Hell," Bert said. "I was robbed the



Two men . . . one woman . . . and the knowledge that one had to die more deadly than the sixguns between them. . . .

By Will Cook

last time, and you know it—gangin' up on a fella that way."

"I don't see why," Bob Overmile said. "We gotta ride sixty miles just so you can spark a gal and get your face slapped for stealin' a kiss. We plumb wore out our welcome in this here town."

Kerry raised his head quickly, giving his friend a very pained look. He was short and stocky with a flat face that was anything but pretty, but there was something compelling in his eyes and humor lurked around the edges of his mouth. He glanced at the peaceful town and said, "They don't understand us, that's all. They got off on the wrong foot with us the last time. I want to give 'em all another chance. Every man gets a second chance, that's my motto."

"Motto, hell," Bob said. "You want to see Milo and pick a fight." He lifted the reins, indicating that he was impatient to be under way. Kerry snuffed out his smoke, and then there was no more talk. Fifteen minutes later they crossed the covered bridge north of town and traveled the length of Custer Street.

They pulled in at the hitchrack before Murphy's Hotel and dismounted. Frank Burk, the marshal of Wineglass, had been taking his ease with his feet elevated on the porch railing. These now hit the floor with a thump, and he rose and crossed to the edge of the boardwalk. He was a big man, tough faced, but there was no meanness in his eyes when he spoke. "Well . . . Kerry! You must have liked our jail."

Bert shot him a quick smile and said, "You could have gone all night without sayin' that." He turned his head and looked up and down the street.

"No need to look," Burk said in a half-joking voice. "We got all the women locked up until you leave town."

"Hell," Bert said, "I thought there was a dance tonight at the school house."

The marshal lighted a cigar and spoke around it. "There is, but I gotta warn you —any trouble and into the cooler you go." He gave Bob Overmile a quick look and added, "That applies to you too, Overmile. I remember you from the last time." He made a turn as if to leave, then held out his hand. "I almost forgot—I'll take your guns."

"What the devil!" Bert said, then saw the determination in the marshal's face, and reached under his coat for his .38-40. Bob Overmile produced a short-barreled Colt, and Frank Burk said, "If you boys can stay out of trouble, you can have these when you're ready to leave town. I'll have 'em over at the jail."

"I don't want to go near the place," Kerry said with mock seriousness. "You can lay 'em on the boardwalk." The marshal grinned and went back to his chair on the veranda. Bert Kerry stretched and rubbed his stomach, then said, "A drink at Garfinkle's and then a night of gaiety."

Bob Overmile slanted him an unbelieving glance, and they cut across to the saloon. Garfinkle had a fair crowd at this early hour; the piano player rendered a fast tune with more industry than talent, but the customers made no objections, even applauded vigorously when he finished. Bert found a place near the end of the bar and caught Garfinkle's eye. The saloonkeeper paused and glanced around him as if he were taking a rapid inventory of the breakable items, then slid along the length of the bar and stopped before them. "No trouble tonight, fellas," he said. "Milo don't want no trouble either."

"I'll bet he don't," Bert said and ordered two beers. He reached a stout arm across the bar and took a firm but friendly grip on Garfinkle's string tie. He pulled the man close and said, "Mary ain't married that son of a sheep man, has she?"

Garfinkle's eyes grew round with shock. He looked around hastily as if fearful someone had heard the remark. "My god," he said, "what a thing to say about a Texan! No, she ain't married him and never will. Somehow, she thinks he's short weight."

"He is," Bert stated, "and I'm gonna show her how short before I get older."

GARFINKLE let out a long breath and tapped his head with his forefinger. Overmile's grin said that he agreed with

this. The saloonkeeper took Kerry's sleeve and said, "You're a good fella, Bert. You don't drink too much, you got a good job, and you save your money, but you're too stubborn. You don't believe a man when he says 'no,' and when he swats ya, you think it was a lucky punch. Be a good fella and go back to Hondo. Don't grab the tiger by the tail tonight."

"Why?" Bert wanted to know.

Garfinkle rolled his eyes until they showed a large expanse of the white, and said, "Milo Weeks and some of the young bucks got their heads together and decided to rough you up a little bit if you went near the schoolmarm. I ain't sayin' Mary likes the idea, but there ain't much she can do about it without makin' a damn fool outa ya. Play it smart and don't go near that dance tonight."

"That's what I come here for," Bert said.

"I give up," Garfinkle admitted. He looked at Bob Overmile, who viewed the whole conversation with a great deal of tolerance, and said, "Can't you do anything with him?"

"Nobody can," Overmile said. "Just let him run and someday he'll hit something he can't lick, and it'll either cure him or kill him."

Bert drained his beer and said to Overmile, "Stick around for awhile. I won't be gone long."

Bob Overmile shook his head sadly and murmured, "Don't worry about me, friend. I'll stay right here and nurse this here beer. You go on and get your chops whacked. I don't want any of it."

Kerry grinned and went out, turning right at the next corner and navigating the length of a quiet residential street. Mary Owen kept a room at Mrs. Daniel's rooming house on the corner of Elm Street. Bert paused before the squeaky gate, then opened it, and went up the darkened path. The evening was warm and a gentle breeze whispered through the oaks shielding the lawn. Mrs. Daniel rocked on her porch, suddenly halting the motion of her chair. "Land's sake," she exclaimed. "Bert Kerry! I thought you'd gone for good." She was a heavy woman with iron gray hair, and the years had given her an understanding that was rare.

Bert flopped down on the top step and twirled his hat in his hands. He nodded toward the interior of the house and said, "She home?"

"She's still mad at you," Mrs. Daniel said, "—or so she says, but I know better." She gave a snort of disgust and added, "That Milo—always hangin' around. Seems to me a girl that's twenty-three would have enough sense to see through a man like that."

"Mind if I go in?"

"Heavens no," she said. "I been sittin' here night after night for a month hopin' you'd come back. I don't like a man that gives up easy."

"Give up?" Bert said. "What the hell's that?" He got up and went into the house. The hall was flooded with lamplight, and he turned and mounted the stairs to her room on the upper floor. Light came from under her door, and he rapped softly.

Her footsteps came clear and sharp, and she opened the door, gasped, then tried to close it quickly. Bert put out a beefy hand, holding it against her small strength and pleaded, "Mary, listen to me—please."

"Go away," she said, but her voice lacked conviction. "You're nothing but trouble."

"I only wanted to ask you to go to the dance with me," Bert said.

"I'm going with Milo Weeks, thank you," she said, but he noticed that she no longer tried to close the door. She sure was pretty, Bert thought. About as big as a pinch of salt, but she curved where a woman ought to curve. Her eyes were large and brown, and she had a whale of a temper.

"How about savin' me a couple of them dances then?" Bert asked. She considered this for a moment and shook her head.

"Why not?" He wanted to know. "I can dance as good as that tanglefooted saddle-bum."

She agreed with this. "You can fight too," she supplied. "When Ray Dunlap called, you punched him in the nose. Harry Simmons left town after talking to you. There's something about you that worries me." She stood aside, and he came into her room. She left the door ajar, and he found that he had suddenly grown another left foot and didn't know where to put it.

"Bert," she said seriously, "it isn't that I don't like you, it's—well, you're so impulsive, and—and, a little violent. Sometimes it frightens me—the way you do things. People talk, Bert. You're so blamed stubborn, and you've such a temper." She saw that she was making a very poor impression on him and switched her tactics. "I'm the school teacher—I have certain rules of conduct that I must adhere to. The last time I went for a buggy ride with you we didn't get home until three in the morning. I don't know what I'd have done if Mrs. Daniel hadn't smoothed it over with the school board."

"Ya had fun though, didn't you?"

She let out a long sigh and said, "Yes, Bert, I did, but can't you see—that isn't the point. We can't go through life just having fun."

"Why?" Bert asked. "Am I supposed to go around sad-faced and serious?"

"I told you how it is," she offered lamely.

"Shucks," he said. "Things'll be different after we're married."

Color streamed into her face, and she turned away from him, and her voice was small and a little pleased. "I didn't know you had thoughts like that, Bert."

"Well, I have," he told her. "I—I love you, and that's all there is to it. I ain't a man to give up easy."

It was a moment before she spoke; then her voice was torn with indecision. "You make me so confused sometimes. I—you're such a blunt man."

HE THOUGHT about it and decided that she was like a skittish horse. He'd have to be careful and patient to bring her up on the rope. "I'll see you at the dance," he said and turned and left the room. She came and stood in the doorway as he started down the stairs.

"Bert," she called softly, and he stopped quickly, his blunt face full of hope. "Please don't fight."

"Oh," he said and went down the steps. Mrs. Daniel still sat in her rocker, and he paused on the edge of the porch. He listened to the sounds drifting from Custer Street and murmured, "Saturday night—there ain't any other night like it." He peeled a wrapper from a long cigar and got it ignited before adding, "Seems that a man'll work his fool head off all week long, but when Saturday night comes he wants to beat his chest and howl at the moon."

"More to life than that," Mrs. Daniel said.

"Sure," Bert agreed. "But howlin' is more fun." He drew deep on his smoke, content with the world, but then the gate squeaked, and his manner changed, and his face became stubborn and unbending.

Milo Weeks came to within three steps of the porch before he recognized Bert Kerry. He brought himself up short, his smooth face covered with a displeased scowl. "Don't you ever get enough?" He asked in a slightly incredulous voice.

"Tell you how it is," Bert said. "When it gets too tough for the rest of the world, then it's just right for me." He grinned, and Milo's face filled with a sudden temper.

The man was tall and heavy-featured with hair thick and wavy and lips bold and curling below a slightly hooked nose. He fashioned a smoke with his legs spread apart, clearly a man with little 'give' to his temper. He said shortly, "Don't make any mistakes tonight, Kerry. We'll be watching for 'em."

"I can blow my own nose," Kerry told

him. "You just take care of yourself."

"Don't worry about it," Milo said. "This is my town. I'm on home ground here." He pushed rudely past Bert, jarring him with his shoulder and went into the house.

Bert half-turned to follow him with his eyes, and Mrs. Daniel swung his attention around when she said, "You just keep away from that man, Bert Kerry!"

"I never give a promise I can't keep," he told her and walked down the darkened path, swinging immediately toward Custer Street and Garfinkle's Saloon.

Bob Overmile still sagged against the bar, his half-empty beer mug before him; Marshal Burk stood at his side in earnest conversation. Bert Kerry sided them and slapped the bar to draw Garfinkle's attention. Overmile studied him with a large question in his eyes and, when he saw no redness on Bert's cheeks, said, "Hail the conquering hero."

Bert took his beer and drank deep, then said, "This is my night—I can feel it in my bones."

"Careful you don't get any broke," Frank Burk cautioned. "Milo can play rough when he has a few friends behind him."

Bert gave him a very pained look and said, "I am a man of peace. Live and let live is my motto."

Frank Burk sighed and murmured, "All right—bullhead. Don't say you haven't been warned." He turned away from the bar and passed through the crowd. Bert watched him until he went out of the door.

"What happened?" Overmile's voice was eager.

"Damned if I know," Bert confided. "Milo's still shovin' his handsome face into the picture and at the moment, I'm on the outside lookin' in. I can't help feelin' that that gal feels a hell of a lot more'n she lets on." He glanced at the wall clock, noticing that it was well after eight, and added, "Let's be on our way." He finished his beer in hurried gulps, and together they forced their way through the gathering crowd and out into the night.

CHAPTER TWO

Proud of Himself!

THE school house sat on a two acre plot behind Race Street, and they left Custer, crossing a vacant lot before angling toward the lighted building. Buggies dotted the playground. Men made dark shapes along the edge of the building with the tips of their cigars glowing and dying; talk rose and fell in soft murmurs. Inside, bunting and decorations hung from the ceiling. The refreshment table stood along the east wall with the preacher and his wife standing guard over the punch bowl to prevent the introduction of hard liquor.

The room was crowded with people standing in friendly knots, talking and laughing. Bert and Overmile passed among them, getting friendly nods; occasionally a word of greeting. They drew stares and some open belligerance from the younger men, but Bert pretended not to notice it. The musicians arrived, a four piece string orchestra, and spent a noisy five minutes arriving at a mutual key. There was a little foot tapping, then they swung into *Dixie* and the dance began. Kerry stayed near the stag line. Overmile leaned against the wall, his thin face slightly bored. Mary Owen arrived on Milo's arm and immediately they swung onto the floor.

He idled an hour away, listening to the music and the sound of capering feet. At last the mood caught him, and he pushed himself away from the wall and cut out onto the dance floor. The music ended, announcing the finish of a set, and Bert saw her across the room. Milo was smiling and perspiring, and Bert pushed past him to stand between them with his back to the big man. "Time for that dance?" he asked her.

Mary's pert face mirrored a moment's

hesitation, then she looked past Kerry and saw Milo's face. "Yes," she said, almost eagerly and took his arm, pulling him away.

Milo was not to be left out, and he took a quick step and caught Kerry on the arm. "Just a minute, friend," he said. "This is a peaceful gathering, and I for one wouldn't want trouble, but if you care to step outside sometime this evening, I'll give you a little of it."

The offer of a fight was an appealing thing to Bert, but the girl sensed it and pulled at him, and Bert said, "Later. Right now I'm gonna dance." The band struck up a lively tune, and he moved onto the floor. Milo Weeks was the farthest thing from his mind."

The worry never left her face, and she said, "Why do you think you have to lick the world? Accept every challenge that's hurled at you?"

Bert grinned and murmured, "Gosh, I ain't got to 'em all yet."

The corners of her mouth pulled down in disapproval, but he felt that she was secretly pleased with him. He whirled her and spotted an open side door, guiding her toward it. She made no protest when they stopped near it, and it gave him encouragement; they went out into the night coolness with nothing but the blackness and the sounds of laughter touching them.

She smoothed her dress and sat down on the steps. He stood above her and the strong call of her pulled at him, making him brash and slightly bold. He took her hand and, when she made no attempt to pull away, knelt before her and said, "Mary, why do we tell ourselves that it's wrong to love each other?"

She had her desires and her yearnings, but the strict propriety in her background executed considerable control over her, and she said, half-sharply, "You presume a great deal, Bert Kerry."

"Honey," Bert said, "all I can offer you is a ranch foreman's pay and a small house and a lot of hard work. Maybe that's wrong, but I ain't got better sense than to think a woman in love would find that enough." He searched her face in the darkness for some clue, but found none. He didn't find rejection either, and it gave him hope. "Honey—do you love me?"

There was no lie in her, he knew that and perhaps was unfair with his question, but time was something he had little of. She said in a very small voice, "Yes—I love you, Bert."

"Then pack your things, and I'll rent a rig, and we'll leave tonight. Old man Carruthers is in there. He's the head of the school board. Tell him you're gonna quit, and that's all there is to it."

She clasped her hands together and closed her eyes, and he saw then that it was her desire, but that strictness came into her again and she was torn in her beliefs. "I can't, Bert—I can't. I want to, but it's impossible. Don't you see, it's the difference between us. You do things on impulse and maybe they turn out all right, but I'm afraid to live like that—I couldn't live like that. I'd have to know that there was something in you that responded to logic. I'm sorry that I'm the way I am, but I can't help it. Life isn't something to be hogged. It has to be lived slowly and sedately to be enjoyed."

IT WAS the end of talk for him, he saw the uselessness of it and pulled her to her feet, wrapping his arms hungrily about her. She melted against him instinctively, before her propriety asserted itself. He kissed her long and fervently.

Her fingers bit into the back of his neck, and she moaned softly as he released her. "Now," Bert said, "what was sedate about that? Love isn't mild like a glass of warm water before going to bed. It's fire and passion and hate and wickedness all rolled into a ball. Why do you hold back against something you really want?"

It took her a moment to regain her con-

trol, and her voice was unsteady when she used it. "We can't change ourselves, Bert. I'm sorry because I'm the way I am."

"That's a lame excuse," he said. "If you was any different from what you are, then I wouldn't give you a second look."

She placed her palms against his chest, and it was an embrace, so much emotion filled her voice. "Darling—you're like the wind, wild and free. You excite me—just being near you, but it takes more than just that. You're everything I want, yet not what I want. Sometimes you're so unbending—so self-willed, that I'm afraid." She turned from him and went up the short steps to pause in the lighted door. "Maybe we'd better not dance again this evening. I don't think it's wise."

He said nothing, and she went inside and was immediately lost in the crowd. He found another cigar in an inner pocket and lighted it, drawing deep on the biting smoke. He stood thus for a few minutes then became acutely conscious of not being alone. A shadow detached itself from along the side of the building, then three more stepped away.

Milo Weeks moved into the edge of the light and said tightly, "Tonight you stepped way out of line, Kerry."

The old temper and rashness returned in tumbling waves, and he said, "Why don't you put me back then."

"I intend to," Milo said and turned to one of the men with him. "Get out front where you can see if anyone's comin'. I don't want to be disturbed once I get started."

The man trotted away, and Milo removed his coat and string tie, then made a great show of rolling his sleeves. The two men with him stood slightly to the rear and one side. Bert threw his cigar away and stepped down from the porch until he was even with Milo. Milo said, "No hard feelings, Kerry. Let's make this a friendly fight." He stuck out his hand.

Being the kind of a man he was, Bert reached for it, glancing down at it at the same time, and Milo stretched him flat with one punch. Instinct made Kerry roll, and Milo's kick went wild. Bert regained his feet in a swoop before the big man could reset himself. An anger burned now in Kerry's eyes and he dashed the blood away from his mouth and said, "Milo, from here on in it's gonna get rough."

If there was any fear in Kerry, it didn't show. He bore into the heavier man with a singleness of purpose that made Milo give ground. For a moment, it was give and take, then Kerry hit the big man with a wicked punch, rocking him back on his heels. Milo tried to cover himself, but Kerry flattened him and stood back, waiting for him to get up.

Milo rolled over and gained his hands and knees, then lifted his head and looked at his two friends. Kerry sensed the signal and whirled, but they were on him and he went to the ground beneath their weight. He got in his licks, but they hoisted him to his feet between them, and Milo shuffled forward, his fists cocked. "I know how to handle a cocky buzzard. You want to play dirty—all right, then we'll play dirty." He sledged Kerry along the shelf of the jaw.

He hit him again, this time in the pit of the stomach, turning as the lookout came charging across the school yard. "Let's go," he said breathlessly. "Frank Burk's comin' down the street, and if he finds us fightin' we'll all land in the pokey." He looked at Kerry, still held between the two men and said with a great deal of heat, "What the hell, Milo—can't you whip him by yourself?"

The big man murmured something biting and turned away. The others freed Kerry and shoved him face first into some shrubbery. He watched them leave hurriedly and sat there, a large ache in his head and a wild stubbornness building up within him. He saw the marshal enter the school house, then rose, and went around to the back and washed his face in the well. His jaw was a

solid ache, but he paid no attention to it, walking instead to the front door and reentering.

He saw Milo and his friends by the west wall. Overmile saw Kerry come in and moved toward him, intercepting him. He whistled softly when he saw the bruise and said, "What the hell happened?"

Bert told him in a dozen tight phrases, and Overmile jerked his head around and gave Milo a long look. The big man's back was toward them, and Bert murmured, "Stick around and see that nobody jumps me from behind. I got business to attend to." He moved away, and Overmile followed three paces behind him.

HE SEARCHED the room until he spotted the marshal against the other wall, then cut through the crowd, coming up to Milo from the side. There was a lull in the dancing. People gathered in clusters, talking and lifting their glasses of punch. Bert skirted them and touched Milo on the arm, bringing the big man around with a start.

"We didn't get to finish our dance, honey," Bert said and knocked him against the wall. An open window came down with a loud bang; heads swiveled, and Frank Burk hurried through the crowd, using his shoulders and elbows. Milo stayed back against the wall, the blood bright on his lips, his hands flat against the boards. He made no move, and Kerry wheeled as Burk snapped, "Dammit, who the devil started this?"

Mary Owen was standing away from them amid a group of shocked ladies. There was a heavy disapproval on her face when Bert glanced at her and she pulled her eyes away. Milo pointed to Kerry and said, "He did! I was standing here minding my own business when he up and hits me."

Frank Burk looked at Kerry and there was no humor in the lawman's eyes. "Well?"

"He's lyin'," Bert proclaimed. "We tangled outside before you came, and he left it unfinished."

Burk was no fool, and he was an old hand at this sort of thing. He saw the bruise on Kerry's jaw and the swelling along the bottom lip. He drew his conclusions and said, "I told you what to do when you came to town. Do I hafta lock you up to keep the peace?"

Kerry ignored him and said, "This ain't the end of this, Milo."

The big man's face became holy, and he pleaded with the marshal. "You know that I want peace. Why do we have to put up with these wild ones from some other town who come here just to make trouble?"

Frank Burk's head came around quickly and he said with a great deal of bluntness, "This is a free country, Weeks. A man can come and go pretty much as he pleases as long as he behaves himself. I know you, and I don't think anymore need be said." Milo turned sulky, and Burk took Kerry by the arm. "Now you leave here and don't give us any more trouble tonight."

"You call this justice?" Bert said heavily.

"I'm not arguing with you," Burk insisted. "I'm just telling you to behave yourself. Things have a way of evening themselves up."

"That's too slow for me," Kerry said, but he gave the marshal no more argument and left the schoolhouse. He paused on the outside and stood along the wall in the deep shadows. Overmile joined him and they stood in silence for a long time.

Finally Overmile said, "What's next?"

"What do you think?"

The skinny man shook his head and murmured, "Don't be a damn fool. Burk's a square shooter, and you know it. Let that kinky-haired pretty boy alone. He'll get his."

"I want to give it to him," Bert insisted.

Overmile sighed and said, "That's just the trouble . . . you want to give it to him. Hell, take the lump and let someone else

do it. Take it easy—a lot easier."

"I ain't made that way," Kerry stated.

"Then you better change, cause you're in for trouble before you die if'n you don't."

Kerry shot him an affronted stare and said, "You ain't old enough to be so damn wise. If you wanna preach, go find yourself a cracker barrel." He waited to see whether Overmile had anything further to say and, when he didn't, went around the building to the back door.

He looked both ways and, seeing no one, stepped onto the low porch. A red end of a cigar glowed and faded, and Frank Burk said, "Not tonight, Kerry," and stepped out into the light. Kerry's blunt face was heavy with stubbornness and the marshal added, "Get off the prod, son. It ain't the way to win the war."

"You tell me a better way." Kerry demanded.

Burk sighed and said, "There ain't any way, boy. Some battles you gotta lose. You can't fight 'em all."

"I can try." Bert insisted.

There was no arguing with him, the marshal saw that and motioned with his hand. "Go on—get up town." He waited, and Bert swung away, going toward the front.

Overmile had gone back into the school house, and Bert went around the other side of the building and found a small wing with a window that was unlocked. He saw that no one was around and shoved it open and pulled himself in. He dangled for a moment, half in and half out, then disappeared inside. He found himself in the cloak room and inched his way through the darkness until he found the door. He turned the knob slowly and peered through the crack into the lighted school room. Refreshments were still being served; the table was not more than eight feet away from him.

He waited and watched the crowd mill around the room, then Frank Burk passed before the door, touching a man Kerry couldn't see. The marshal said, "I guess he's gone. I walked around the building, but I didn't see him. Overmile is still around though. Let's have no trouble with him, understand?"

Bert pulled in his breath sharply as Milo Weeks said, "Thanks, Marshal. You don't have to worry about any of us."

Frank Burk was an independent man, and his voice turned brittle as he said, "You go straight to hell, Milo. I don't give a damn who kicks your face in, only I don't want a brawl here tonight." He placed his cigar firmly between his teeth and walked away.

KERRY waited a moment longer, half listening to the crowd, waiting to hear Milo speak again as an assurance that he hadn't moved away. He heard it, the low drawl and shoved the door open and stepped onto the main floor. The big man turned in surprise, and Kerry was on him, lashing out with his fist.

He caught Milo flush on the mouth, then one of Milo's friends made a vague pass, and Bert spun, knocking the man asprawl with a wild clout to the side of the head. Men shouted; a woman screamed, and a long cry went up. "Marshal! Fight!"

Milo came at Kerry as he half turned away, but the young man ducked low and loosened the man's teeth with an up-driving punch. A man leaped astride Kerry from behind, bearing him to the floor, then another took hold of him, and they hoisted him to his feet, struggling wildly but securely held between them.

Milo saw Bert's momentary helplessness and stung him with an angry blow to the cheekbone. Frank Burk roughly forced his way through the crowd and blocked Milo's next effort. The big man forgot himself for a moment and gave the marshal considerable resistance, but Burk was an old hand and slapped the big man heavily and pushed him back until he was against the wall. "No more of that," he said, and Milo quieted.

Bob Overmile had observed this from his station along the wall across the room and came over. He looked at one of the men holding Kerry and said softly, "Let go of him."

The man gave him a short glance that said, "Mind your own damn business," and Bob took him by the collar and knocked him free with one punch. Frank Burk had turned in time to see this, and he gave Overmile a narrow glance, "You dealin' yourself in this?"

"I always been in," Bob said, and looked at the man on Bert's right. "Do I have to knock you loose too?" he asked, and the man stepped back, glad to be out of it.

The marshal faced Kerry and said, "What does it take to make you quit?" Kerry gave him no answer, and Burk added, "I can throw you in the pokey until you cool off."

"Don't be a jackass, Bert," Overmile said. "Tell him what happened."

Kerry shook his head and told the marshal. "Go ahead and lock me up, but when I get out I'll be after Milo again. He started something. Now let's see him finish it."

Someone in the crowd grew impatient and called out, "Hell, let 'em fight!"

The marshal reached a decision then and turned to Milo. "I know both of you roosters. Go on outside and finish it so we can have a dance here." Most of the men approved of this and said so with loud cat calls and an isolated rebel yell. The jug had gone around several times behind the pickets, and blood clamored for a good fight.

Milo looked at the marshal for a long moment and said, "A hell of a thing for a lawman to say! You're supposed to keep the peace."

"I'm trying to," Frank Burk maintained. "We sure won't have any until you two settle this."

"I wouldn't dirty my hands on him," Milo said, and a howl of protest went up.

The marshal said quietly, "Looks like it's out of your hands now, Milo. Better go on outside."

The big man looked around at the people he knew, then said, "Like a bunch of dogs, waitin' for a fight." No one answered him, and an uneasy quiet settled over the room. Milo measured it in his mind and didn't like it, but there it was, and there was nothing he could do about it. He moved his heavy shoulders and said, "To hell with it. I can whip him just as easy right here."

IT WAS what they wanted to hear, and they murmured among themselves, and formed a twenty foot circle around Kerry and the big man. The musicians left the bandstand, pushing and elbowing for a place in the front row. Milo looked at Kerry, and his temper flared, getting the best of him. "You saddle tramp—you got a lesson coming."

"Then give it to me," Bert said and stepped into the big man. Milo's temper vanished, and he took a backward step. He forgot attack, trying only to defend himself against Kerry's whirlwind charge, and Kerry beat his defense aside and drove him to his knees. He backed away, and Milo took his time getting to his feet. Kerry moved in again, and, for a moment, Milo's temper rose, and he fought wildly, then went down under a sledging blow. He went out, but he made no attempt to rise.

Bert stood back, motioning for the man to get up, but Milo shook his head. Kerry turned his head and looked at the marshal, and there was a frank disapproval in the lawman's eyes. Some of the men shuffled their feet uncomfortably; their home town boy was behaving badly and it galled.

Milo was not seriously hurt although the blood stood red and bold on his face. Bert Kerry said, "Get up and fight." Milo looked around him, half ashamed, but shook his head again. This produced a displeased muttering, and Kerry told him, "Say you've had enough."

"I've had enough," Milo said.

"Tell 'em you've been licked," Kerry ordered. Men grew uncomfortable, and one in the back said, "A hell of a note," and a low buzz filled the room.

Bob Overmile said, "Leave him alone, Bert."

"I ain't through," Bert said hotly.

"Yes, you are," Bob said, and his voice had suddenly grown slightly dangerous. Bert looked at him; then the fairness within him pushed at him, and he said, "You're right. I had no right to do that."

He turned suddenly and shoved his way through the ring of men. He headed for the nearest exit, the open side door across the room. He stepped out into the night, Overmile behind him and had taken three steps when Mary Owen's voice halted him. "Just a minute, Bert!"

He stopped so quickly that Overmile rammed into him. The lean man glanced at the girl, then at Kerry and moved away, pausing in the deep shadows along the building, out of earshot. Mary Owen's face was severe with anger and she took Bert firmly by the arms and tried to shake him. "Aren't you proud of yourself?" she said.

"No I ain't," Bert admitted. There was a sincerity in his voice that took her back, but only for a moment.

She possessed a will, a stubbornness as strong as his own, and once started, a thing was not put down until it was finished. "Do you want to know why I won't marry you? Well, I can tell you now. There is no unbending—no forgiveness in you. It wouldn't work because you never learned to take a slap in the face without giving one back."

"You know how it started," Bert said.

She made a disgusted motion and snapped, "Do you think I'm a fool? I know Milo—what kind of a man he is. I know of the threats he made against you around town, but I was glad he did. I wanted him to pick this fight, but I also hoped you'd rise above it and forget that it happened. I wanted to see if you had that in you, Bert." She made a small clucking noise with her lips and added, "What you did is bad. Milo is unpopular, but he *is* from Wineglass, and the townsmen will side him right or wrong. You struck at their pride when you made him quit. It was the wrong thing—believe me."

"I guess I had enough for one night," Bert said and turned away from her.

CHAPTER THREE

The Right Thing

OVERMILE left the shadows and joined him in silence. They walked to Custer Street and down its length and entered Garfinkle's Saloon.

A major portion of Wineglass' society was at the dance, and Garfinkle was enjoying a little lull in his business. They leaned against the bar, and Garfinkle drew two beers without comment and placed them before them. He saw the bruises on Kerry's face and murmured, "How does Milo look?" Bob shook his head and said 'lay off' with his eyes, and Garfinkle went to the other end of the bar.

They drank in silence for a few minutes, then Bert Kerry asked suddenly, "What's the matter with me, Bob?"

"You want an honest answer, or do you want to make you feel good?" Bert shot him a distasteful glance and Overmile went on. "Roughly, nothin' a good kick in the teeth wouldn't cure."

"Go ahead and kick me," Kerry invited.

Overmile shook his head. "Goes deeper than that. You go at things like a bull elk in ruttin' season. You do as you damn please—but that only works just so long, then you gotta do something that hurts like hell. Take Mary—you saw her and liked her and tried to convince her in ten minutes that you should be the only man in her life. People don't grow like that—only Bert Kerry does."

Bert sipped his beer and retreated deeper

into his thoughts. Bob Overmile opened his mouth to say more, then shrugged when he saw the look on Kerry's face and waggled his finger for a re-fill. The saloon door opened, and Frank Burk came in, giving the room a sweeping glance. He saw the two men standing alone and came along side of them.

He glanced at Overmile, then to Kerry, and it was to him that he said, "Buck up—the night ain't over yet."

There was something in the man's voice that caused Kerry to break away from his thoughts, and he raised his head to give the marshal a searching glance. Frank Burk ordered a drink, saying nothing until Garfinkle placed it before him and went to the other end of the bar. "The boys got pretty rough with Milo after you left."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Burke said. "Milo's friend—the one who was on lookout earlier in the evening—spilled it about how Jack and Ray held your arms while Milo slugged you in the teeth. Some of the younger bucks took him down to the pond and ducked him good." He glanced at Kerry and saw that his blunt face was severe. "Hell," he added, "I thought you'd be glad to hear."

Kerry leaned on the bar and idly twirled his glass. "All my life," he said, "I've fought my own fights, but this one I wish to hell I'd let slide by. Right now, I got a hold of somethin' I can't handle, and the harder I try the deeper I get." He slapped the bar heavily and added, "Dammit, I want to marry that girl!"

Burk smiled and said, "Off the record I'd like to see you do it, but you ain't gonna make her fall for you by kickin' hell outa her boy friends." Bert opened his mouth to protest and the marshal said, "Shudup and let me finish! Now let's look at this thing with a little sense for a change. Mary's a pretty thing, but she's an awful prude. Maybe she liked you right off, but she couldn't come up like some dame outa a dance hall and give you a big hug. However, if she collected a string of boyfriends—well, there's nothin' like competition to stimulate another man into thinkin' about weddin' bells."

"So you went and punched 'em in the nose," Overmile said.

"Hell!" Bert snapped. "I didn't want them slobs hangin' around and beatin' my time! I know we'd make a go of it if she'd get over bein' so danged stubborn and say yes."

"Women," Frank Burk confided, "is funny sometimes. When a man says he understands women, then you know you're talkin' to a damn liar. A woman will go south when she wants to go north. She buys a hat she don't need to impress a man she wouldn't have on a bet. She'll bat her eyelashes at a stranger on a train and raise holy hell if he gives her a little squeeze." The marshal shook his head regretfully. "I seen 'em all—from A to Z—and I can tell you that it's been quite an education."

"She thinks I'm a roughneck," Bert maintained.

"She's right," Overmile said.

"You shut up," Bert told him. "I'm talkin' to this gentleman about a delicate subject."

"Sure she does," Burk agreed. "That's the kind of a man she wants, but take a little advice—don't have quite so much salt on. They like to mother a man a little. They want a brute when they're bein' chased, but when they put their rope on ya, then they want somethin' nice and tame."

"I don't need a mother," Kerry said, "a wife's what I want."

The marshal let out an exasperated breath and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. He finished his beer and stated, "Some men have to learn the hard way." He made a move as if to turn away and added, "Come over to the jail and get your gun. Milo said he was gonna kill ya for what ya done to him."

For the first time, Kerry showed a genuine worry. "The crazy fool! I don't want

no part in a shootin'! No part at all!"

THE marshal tapped him on the chest with a forefinger and said, "You play rough, Bert. You gotta expect this sooner or later. Milo ain't much, but you pushed him even farther down. Now he wants to come back, and there's only one way for him to do it. You'd better pick up your gun."

Bert stood silent for a full minute, then said in a bare whisper, "All right. I'll be over."

"Don't waste too much time," Burk cautioned and went out.

Bert finished his beer; Overmile studied him at length and said, "We should have stayed in Hondo."

"For once," Kerry said with surprising seriousness, "you're dead right." He turned then and Overmile turned with him, and they walked out into the night and across the street to the jail.

"I hate to see a thing like this," Burk said and handed Kerry his gun. The young man spread the spring of his shoulder holster and nestled the weapon under his arm. "There's always men like Milo—full of fight talk, but somehow they lack the sand to cut it, or the good sense to leave well enough alone. Usually it ends up like this—with guns—and one of them is stretched out, and the other man is sorry."

Kerry listened to this, his face worried, then said, "You ain't makin' it any better by talkin' about it."

"Nobody said it was good," the marshal stated. "I've killed my man, and, even when he deserved it the worse way, I always wondered if I made a mistake somewhere and could have done it without shootin'."

Bert gave it some thought and murmured, "Something I never knew before—that a man could win and lose at the same time."

"For every victory, there's a price," the marshal said and lighted a cigar. He looked at Bob Overmile and said, "You stay here until it's over."

The thin man's eyes widened, and he said, "What the devil?"

"He's got enough trouble," Burk said. "Milo's one of those crazy guys who stands in front of a mirror every day and practices his draw. I don't know's he's ever shot a man, but you never can tell about a man like that. You stay here just the same."

Kerry acted like he hadn't heard this. He said, "I'm going over to Mrs. Daniel's and see Mary."

"You'll be wastin' your time," Burk told him.

Kerry gave him a lopsided smile and said, "Know of a better way to waste it?" The marshal shook his head, and Bert stepped onto the darkened boardwalk, then turned down the street. When he turned the corner, he could see the schoolhouse. The dance had broken up early; men were drifting up town, seeking strategic positions along Custer Street.

A small lamp glowed in Mrs. Daniel's hall, shedding a faint light over the vine-covered porch. He opened the gate, and the low voices stopped. Nothing was said until he touched the bottom step, then Mrs. Daniel's surprised voice. "Land's sake, Bert Kerry. Haven't you any better sense than to be on the street." She glanced at Mary, then rose and added, "It's past my bedtime," and went into the house.

A silence fell between them and Bert said softly, "I didn't want this—I want you to know that."

She rose and came off the porch to touch him and her voice was husky. "Bert—if you love me—get on hour horse and ride out."

He was shocked that she could ask such a thing. He said, "Run? From that fancy-pants bluffer?"

"Would you rather kill him, than sacrifice that much of your pride?"

He found himself confronted with a woman's logic, and he didn't know what to do

about it. He studied her face in the meager light and said, "Tell me what to do, Mary. I honestly don't know."

The decision was hard for her, but she had a will and drew upon it. "I won't tell you, Bert. It's something you must decide for yourself. I can make it easy for you, but I have a future at stake. If I must gamble—I'd rather gamble now." She clasped her hands together in a half-fearful gesture and added, "I have to know what kind of a man you really are, Bert—I just have to know." She saw the look on his face, and it shattered her reserve. "Bert—Bert, don't hate me—please, don't hate me."

He gathered her into his arms because words were not in him, but she was a wise woman and understood the fervency of his embrace. He released her at last and kissed her. There was nothing more to say, he understood that and left her, walking down the darkened path to town.

There was little fear in Bert Kerry, just a genuine puzzlement. He understood Milo better than the man understood himself because they were alike, only Kerry was more so. Knowing he was stronger than Milo left him with a strange feeling. He knew then how it would end, he felt it that strong. He stopped suddenly as the thought struck him. If he was so sure, then Mary was equally sure because she possessed this knowledge of him. Overmile knew—and the marshal knew. Perhaps even the townsmen knew because they were at the schoolhouse when Milo knew shame. It gave him a jolt, forcing his mind to a decision, and he paused at a break between the buildings and drew his .38-40 from his shoulder holster and tossed it among the rubbish.

THE decision gave him no relief, but he shrugged it off because habit was strong within him. He turned on Custer street and walked to Garfinkle's Saloon. The town was unusually quiet although store windows were bright with lamplight. He mounted Garfinkle's short porch and went in. There were two dozen men in the room, and they all looked at him in unison, then shifted their eyes as he came against the bar. He ordered a beer, then glanced at the mirror behind the bar as Frank Burk entered. The marshal stopped by Bert's elbow and said softly, "He's down at Harry Wickboom's Pool Hall. He's talkin' big so maybe it'll blow over."

"You believe that?"

Burk shook his head. "Naw, I'm just talkin'. He's made too many brags to back down now."

Kerry turned his head and looked at the marshal for a long moment, then murmured, "You could stop this you know."

"Maybe," Frank said, "but I don't want to." He studied his folded hands and added. "You're between the devil and the sweat. You can shoot him, then spend the rest of your life regretting it."

Bert's temper crowded into his face, and he said savagely, "What am I supposed to do—be a sitting duck?"

The marshal's face settled into tired lines and he said, "Do what's right, that's all."

"What's right?"

"I couldn't say. It differs with men."

Kerry lowered his head and thought, "What's he trying to tell me?" But he could find no answer. The marshal left him and joined a group clustered around a table along the west wall. Kerry finished his beer and ordered another, but he had no thirst.

Garfinkle eyed him with considerable concern and Kerry asked, "You too?"

The saloonkeeper shrugged and murmured, "You're a good fella. A little wild, maybe." He polished an imaginary spot on the bar, wanting to say more, but held back by some force Kerry didn't understand. He looked around the room. They were all watching him, measuring him it seemed and he wondered why.

Garfinkle moved away and then he was alone at the bar. Low voices filled the room, but he paid little attention. He

swung around, undecided, then went out and crossed the street to the jail. The front door was open; Bob Overmile sat in the marshal's chair looking at a stack of reward dodgers.

He gave Bert a long look, then went back to his reading. Kerry sat on the edge of the desk and reached out a big hand, taking the dodgers away from Overmile, and tossed them on the floor.

"You ought not bother a man when he's readin'," Overmile said.

"I want a few answers," Bert stated.

"The only answers worth a hoot," Overmile said, "are the ones a man figures out for himself."

"I thought you was my friend?"

"The best you got," Bob told him.

Bert blew out a long breath and said, "What would you do if a man was prowlin' the streets for ya?"

"Shoot him on sight," Bob said without hesitation, "because I'd be scared."

"I don't understand that," Bert admitted.

Overmile shrugged. "Something you gotta dig out for yourself." He bent down and retrieved the reward dodgers and sorted through them until he found his place.

"Mary wanted me to ride out of town," Bert said.

"That's one way of doing it," Overmile opined.

"A hell of a thing for you to say!"

Overmile said, "It ain't me he's after."

"You're no help at all."

"Nobody is at a time like this," Overmile said and looked at Kerry. The thing he had been feeling came up again and brushed him, but eluded him before he could contact it. Overmile tossed the dodgers on the desk and said, "A man ought to look through those. Some pretty young kids there with some bad records. Makes a man wonder what can happen to change a man into something like that. Makes him stop and wonder just how far bullheadedness can lead him."

"What're you tryin' to say?"

"Nothin' at all," Bob stated and closed his friend out by leaning back in the marshal's chair and pulling his hat down over his eyes. Kerry stared at him a long moment, then crossed to the door and let himself out.

He stood on the edge of the boardwalk and gave the darkened street a glance. A half-block down, light streamed from the open doors of Wickbloom's Pool Hall, then it darkened as a big man stepped out with a dozen men trailing him. Kerry pulled in his breath and held it. He stood rooted until Milo swung his head and saw him.

THERE was some hesitation in the big man, but his talk had pushed at him, and he stepped into the street, walking toward Kerry with slow strides. The men who followed Milo, broke then and scattered along the boardwalk, well out of the line of fire. Milo's face was white and set, and he kept his thumb hooked in his gunbelt. He halted ten feet from Kerry and said, "Tonight you made a lot of mistakes."

"It's all in the point of view," Kerry said in a voice that was strangely calm. He knew what he was going to do then and did it. He turned until he was quartered away from Milo, presenting his back to the man, and walked across the street.

Milo's heavy voice split the night. "Turn around, Kerry!"

Bert kept on walking. The thing that eluded him came sharper then, and he gained a faint wisdom. With it came fear, sharp and probing, and he tried to beat it down. He took another three steps, and Milo shouted, "For the last time—turn around!"

Kerry took the bottom step, then the next, then there was a shout, and a gun went off, and a heavy fist sledged him in the small of the back, driving forward onto the porch.

Men shouted in the street, and the marshal boiled out of Garfinkle's, almost step-

ping on Kerry. He heard Overmile's voice, and Milo's shouting, "You all saw him do it! He was reaching for it under his coat!"

Kerry felt himself being rolled over; it was Frank Burk that held him up. "Just take it easy," the marshal said and the men crowded around him with Milo pushing his way to the front, the gun still dangling in his hand and a wild, glad look on his heavy face. He'd just shot a man and it wasn't so bad, not nearly as bad as he'd imagined, that much was plain on his face. Frank Burk reached under Kerry's coat, and his fingers touched the empty holster. He threw the coat back and all of the men saw it too.

Milo's face fell and he looked around him uneasily. He said in a loud, bawling voice, "You men saw him pull! By god it's around here! He had to drop it!"

Several men searched for the gun and, when they failed to find it, crowded against Milo, suddenly caught up in an ugly mood. Kerry kept his eyes focused on Frank Burk's face. He found it easier to ride the pain that way. One man bolted off the porch for the doctor. Overmile was by Kerry then and he said, "Where's your gun?"

Kerry made a weak motion and said, "I chucked it—an hour ago—between some buildings on Elm street."

"He's lyin'!" Milo yelled. "He pulled first! You fellas seen him!"

One blunt-faced man growled and said, "I saw it all and Kerry's hands never left his sides. He was just walkin'."

Frank Burk nodded to two men, and they lifted Kerry and took him into Garfinkle's, laying him face down on a crap table. The crowd followed, shoving Milo ahead of them. Overmile turned and went out the door, heading for Mrs. Daniel's boarding house on Elm Street.

Milo said, "By god, don't nobody try to pin a killin' on me!"

The marshal whirled on him and struck him solidly in the mouth. He hit the big man again in the stomach, at the same time wrenching the gun from his hand and slashing him across the jaw with the butt. Milo would have fallen, but the men held him erect, and the marshal rocked him with another driving punch. Someone said, "That's enough, Frank," and the lawman turned away, shaking.

The doctor forced his way through the crowd that packed the door, and a swamper came over with three lamps. The room suddenly smelled strongly of choloroform, and the men backed away to give the doctor room. Milo's face was streaming blood, but the two men held him firmly.

The marshal faced him again and said with soft wickedness, "If that boy dies, I'm gonna slap the horse out from under you, so help me god."

"I thought he had a gun," Milo said weakly. "You'd think when a man was after him, he'd have sense enough to hang onto his gun."

"Shut your yella mouth!" Burk spat at him. "I've seen hundreds just like you —full of big talk and whisky guts. You think you're tough, but you just shot a man who's tougher than you'll ever be. He never needed a gun to tame you." Burk lowered his voice and some of the wildness faded from his eyes. He told the men that held Milo, "Take him over to the jail and lock him up."

He turned on the crowd then, breaking them up with rough words, then turned back to the crap table and the doctor who sweat in the lamplight. Kerry still lay face down, slightly sick from the choloroform. A pan of bloody water sat on the floor; bloodstained towels lay in a sodden heap. Burk watched the doctor finish his bandaging and said, "How bad is he?"

"Young and tough—he'll live if he gets good care."

"He'll get it," Burk said, and it was a promise.

The doctor snapped the clasps on his

(Continued on page 114)

STAR'S PIN-UP GIRL OF THE MONTH

Men stared at her wherever she went—in their eyes, desire and speculation—for here, rumor said, was a woman whose kisses more than one man had tasted and many more might. . . .

For more about gorgeous Glenda, turn to page 79.

"Don't," she breathed. "Not now."

DRIFTER'S DARLING

By Thomas Calvert

In the rough, woman-hungry cattle country, Nelly Connoyer, too good to stay a sodbuster's siren, brought disgrace to the men who fought over her —and death to those who dared seek her love!

I CAME off the desert looking like a charred corpse and feeling a little worse. Lights were shooting every which way in front of me, and tornadoes were racing around inside my head. I didn't know where I was, but it didn't matter. It was a valley, and there was a thread of trail that widened, and after a time I caught sight of a homestead up ahead.

My pony kept trying to pull off trail, and finally I let it have its head. A few hundred yards over, we dropped down on a stinking creek. My throat felt full of barbed wire and sand, and I needed a drink like nothing holy. But there were three cows down at the ford lying dead, half buried on a spit of sand. It looked like quicksand, but my eyes were doing tricks, and there was that smell. They had probably drowned, but I was scared of poison water.

I dragged my pony's head around and put it hobbling back toward the homestead.

They'd seen me and had the stage all set to greet me. A stocky, wooden-faced man without a sixgun stood with his boots planted in the small barn doorway. An Ohio clodbuster, scared stiff, with a scatter-gun leaning right beside him, I thought with contempt.

Gaunted as I was, I could have shot his boot soles off him before he could grab it.

A freckled faced kid with a mop of hair that would scorch your hand leaned out of the loft above him. Across from the barn, a woman stood in the kitchen doorway. She looked young to have a kid that age, and, when you adjusted your vision through the lemon-colored heat, damned pretty. And as I looked at her, her prettiness came alive like when you take the summer cheese-cloth off a picture.

I thought, She's ten, twelve, years younger than that grubber. But that wasn't the whole answer. The answer lay in the desolation of the place, the monotony of shimmering heat, the loneliness, the dissatisfaction. It was probably fourteen miles to the nearest crossroads and not a civilized neighbor around.

I'd seen the barn and house and corrals and a big man-built tank out in the pasture. I wouldn't have taken the trouble to build them, but they were built to stay. That told the story of the man and the place: dirt poor, but sweating foureen hours a day, with the laughs and fun worn plumb out of him, and likely with never anything to say to his wife that wasn't a worry.

I thought, She needs a few laughs and a little fun, and she's got a lot of heat stoked up in her. This is where I'll stay a space.

I hadn't thought of how I must look, but I touched my hat to her and tried to smile, and that's what saved the day. Then I looked at this thick-muscled jasper and tried not to let the contempt roll out of me. Very civilly, I said, "We could use a piece of yore water real bad, mister."

He nodded at the pump and said, "Help yourself." He didn't move, and his expression didn't change. There was a wheezy tightness in his voice. He was scared witless. I guess not yellow-scared, but scared of strangers. Well, with a woman like that to set any drifter afire, maybe I'd be scared myself.

I swung Baldy over to the trough and started to climb off, and that was the first time I knew just how bad a way I was in. I teetered and lost balance, and my knee buckled. I had to grab for the pommel and drag myself together to make it.

I pumped a small drink in the trough for Baldy, and doused my head while I drank. I've bathed in mineral springs, but no other water ever felt as good as that. Then I took off my gauntlets and turned my shirt in clean down onto my chest and scrubbed myself clean of that desert. When I turned from the pump I saw approval on the woman's face. My eyes looked like hot coals in my head, and I was gaunted and fevered and had a week's growth of beard. So it must have been my pride that caught her. In any case, I could smile better, and I did and saw excitement touch her before she turned back into the shadows of the kitchen.

Baldy was too hot yet to guzzle, so I strolled over to the corral for a look. A saddled horse stood under a shed, still hot. Four cows were inside with their hides hanging loose as crinkled paper.

I looked at the hick. "Stampede?" I asked.

"They strayed," he said. "Mebbe they did."

There was something funny in his tone. He was angry, but cautious. I thought of those three deadheads I'd seen at the ford. There'd been fresh cow tracks through the graze this side. Four alive and three dead didn't add up if that was poison water. If it was quicksand, not even a clodhopper would be stupid enough to graze them near

there. I looked back at these cows. They'd sure been run.

Yessir, that was just the answer. They'd been cut out and run to hell and back, and those three deadheads had been crowded into the quicksand. So even the two-bit grubbers have their feuds, I thought. Probably I grinned, because a man with a feud in backwoods country who doesn't wear a sixgun is sure asking for trouble, or sure trying hard to avoid it, hard enough to eat crow and crawl in muck. I figured that was just about what he'd done.

He hadn't moved, and he hadn't said any more, and I said, "That sweated weight cost you plenty."

His jaws tightened and went a little gray along the edges. His eyes smoldered, but there was something else under the fire, a kind of defeat such as only a woman can give. I thought, Their year's beef crop, and they lost almost half. There goes her new Sunday dress, and curtains, and mebbe a new cookstove he'd done promised.

I SPUR-DRAGGED through the yard's thick dust and felt Baldy. He'd cooled, and I gave him a real drink he could drown in, and took another for myself. I filled my canteen, and then, like I'd just noticed, I took a look at Baldy's hoofs.

We'd been four full days in that desert firepit. You can figure what his hoofs were like. I said, "Baldy can't go much more. What would the chances be to rest up here a bit?" I reached in a pocket and rifled some coins.

He said, stone-faced, "We ain't even got room to put you up in the barn. But you'll hit Murdoch's before sundown."

I let my contempt show then. I knew damned well he was scared stiff, not just scared that somebody might take time with his woman, but scared that, if real trouble started, he might not be able to handle his end.

I said, for the woman's benefit, "Well, same neighborhood. What do you figure the chances for hiring there?"

His eyes dropped unconsciously to the way I wore my gun. He said kind of grimly, "Probably good!"

The feud! I thought, and that didn't fit my plans at all. I had to fix things to stay here.

I started to climb back into leather. I lurched out of balance by intent, but once off, I damn neared crashed. I wasn't going to have to fake what I meant to do so much at that! I had to throw myself at the saddle and pull myself aboard with all my strength.

I sat a minute catching breath while Baldy finished drinking. Then I touched my hat to the woman again. Still looking at her I said, "That's just about the sweetest drink I've ever had. It's one that I'll remember."

She colored, and her eyes sparked. She caught it, but her old man was too busy worrying. I nodded and told him, "Obliged for the water."

Then I looked up at the kid and grinned. "Regular little carrot top just like I was! Nipper, here's a little souvenir mebbe you ain't ever seen."

I fished in a vest pocket, and the kid dropped down like a cat. I flipped him one of the new eight-sided gold quarters, small as your pinky and thin as paper. I touched Baldy and could hear the kid's excited yip.

I heard something else. I heard the woman call, "Will, that man's sick! He'll never make it."

"He made the desert," Will growled.

I rode ahead into the dancing sea of heat. You'd have thought this was a boom development. That son had pole fenced and ditched a lane just as if there were a real trail for it to fork into. There wasn't, but the rut path turned at the end of the fence. I figured there was just enough heat screening me to make this look on the level.

I stopped Baldy and knuckled back my hat and then got down and lay out flat upon the ground. I was going to run a big fourflush, see? Only, I didn't know I was so sick. The second I flattened out, the whole sky fell on me. Next thing I know, I'm in a shadowed room of the house, and she's spoon feeding me broth.

I had an idea time had gone by. But I didn't know how much. She didn't know I was awake. She put the cup down on a chair and sat down beside me, looking out the window. Her hand lay open against mine atop a nice white sheet.

I wasn't feeling too full of oats yet. I was pretty weak. So I just lay there watching her, and thinking she was a heap prettier than I'd first seen. Pretty and stormy and dissatisfied. I knew it was her doing that I was in there.

She wasn't wearing anything but a wash housedress, and the heat had plastered the gingham tight against her. From the corner of my eye I could see her bare legs. Not thinking me conscious, she had her skirt pulled high to cool, and, believe me, she had a shape.

I guess my thoughts must have begun to run out of me. She turned her face suddenly and murmured, "You're awake!" But she didn't move, not for a minute. She sat there frozen like a mare with her breath quickening. Then she fought for her will and got up abruptly.

I grinned. I asked, "I look that fierce when I'm awake?' '

She was flushed clear down past her breastline. She said confusedly, "I've . . . you've . . . you've been very sick."

I said, "I'll get sick again if you'll sit down some more."

She liked that. She made a face and shook her finger at me. She said, "Don't think you're that well! Could you eat some solid food?"

I told her, "Ma'am, there ain't anything I couldn't do if it's got yore finger in it! But I need a shave, or it will all get caught in my beard. You got a razor handy?"

She laughed and whisked out calling for Rob. That was the boy. Her name was Nelly. The boy brought in hot water, a mirror, and shaving tools. He watched me with big eyes. He blurted finally, "Say, you sure can handle a razor! Pa knicks hell out of hisself."

He would, I thought. But I didn't say that. I could see it was the kid's room they'd put me in. I thanked him and gave him a silver dollar and promised I'd teach him to shave as good with a meat knife. That won the kid, and I needed him with me, but, while we talked, I came to like him. He wanted to be a two-gun Texas cowboy. None of this breaking your back with a grubbing hoe and plough for him! Then he turned beet red as he thought of his pa and darted out to help his ma.

THE woman had tied her hair and washed the heat out of her face and changed to another dress when she came back with a tray. She had the same hair as the kid, only finer, thicker, and it washed down her back in a fiery cascade.

She sat prim as pot on the very edge of the chair and watched while I ate, but there was excitement in her voice and curiosity in her eyes and I thought, My dish! and I wanted all of it, not just part, and I meant to play my hand that way.

She thought of something suddenly and went to a cupboard in a corner and turned back with my gun and gunbelts. "I guess you'd like this hanging by you," she murmured, and looked at it fixedly a minute, seeing those things in it by which women spin their impression of a man. She gave an excited little shiver and hung the belt over the foot of the bed.

I laughed. I said "Ma'am, where I come from, if a man shows a gun, he'd best have it where he can use it."

She laughed herself and changed it to a place up by my head. While she was hanging it, she stood close, and I could

feel the repressed warmth of her body breaking out and flowing through me. I breathed in her clean, woman smell, and it ran over my feelings like a spicy wind.

When I'd finished, I built a smoke she had somehow gotten for me, my eyes narrowed as I soaked her in, and I could feel my lips thickening, and going a little cruel with hunger. I thought, This is the thing that I've been missing—not just a woman, but a special woman, one with something real to give. This is what will sate the restlessness corroding me and put some pep back into life.

Then the kid was blurting, "Mister, how did you get out onto the desert?"

I said, "Call me Tex, Rob. But about that question, I reckon I just drifted out there plumb addled with fever."

The kid looked disappointed, but the woman looked amused. Her eyes said that, sometime, she'd like to hear a different story.

The whole family trooped in for a visit after supper. The old man, Will, sat tilted back in the corner with his thick thumbs stuck inside his belt. He didn't like my smell any better washed and shaven than he had before. He was suspicious and scared and uncommunicative, and resentful of the gossip I made of the world that lay over the simmering, heat-bound horizon.

It wasn't until I mentioned cross breeding that Will perked up. Then he came down four square on his chair. He leaned an elbow on his knees and started to talk, and, once he'd opened up, the words flooded. He was damned near as lonely for company and talk as she was, and in a contemptuous way, I felt sorry for him.

Then I told him about the rail spur that was planned. It would bring the railroad within about forty miles of their place. He looked like I paid him a compliment. He put his big, thick-muscled hands on each knee and looked at his wife and demanded, "Hear that, Nelly?"

"Yes, I hear," she answered with impatience. "But it doesn't change things much. It doesn't stop our cows from quick-bogging. It doesn't put beef on them, or give us a bull, does it?"

Even with a damned nester, I hated to see what happened. Her quiet words washed across the man's enthusiasm like a floodhead. When the flood had passed, his spirit was torn and washed flat. He just leaned on his knees with his fingers laced, watching the flood while we talked.

I was up next day, but I made the most I could of getting well again. When Will was around, I was a mighty sick and feeble man yet. He wanted me out of that house, and I knew it, but something odd began to strike me. He wasn't jealous. In a way, he seemed glad his wife was getting a little self importance and excitement. He was so crazy over her that anything was all right with him as long as it made her happy.

I thought, The damn fool, because otherwise I'd have felt like a heel. To myself, I jeered at him. To his woman, I said, "If I was him, I'd let a few of them fences and field rows go and ride you out to see a sundown or the moonlight."

She swung to stare at me, and her face looked stricken. She swung away, breathing hard with tumult. "Not once since I came have I ever seen a sundown except from here or the crossroads," she murmured moltenly. Then loyalty came up in her. "But he works so hard, he tries so hard! It's the country, but he won't see it. He's mule stubborn."

"These Murdochs," I asked. "How do they make out?"

Her mouth hardened. "They're like this country. Hard and savage! They do all right."

I said, "I'm looking forward to meeting them people."

She studied me curiously. "Haven't you ever been cautious about anything?"

I grinned. "I'm darned cautious, Nell!

Like now. I'm moving out to the barn before I get asked."

SHE colored furiously and mumbled that I didn't need to, but I could feel her relief and with it, a lessening of the guards she had put upon herself. It was ironic that he wanted me out to get me away from his wife, but that when I got out, she'd be easier to get at.

I thought, Dumbhead, but what would you expect? A damnfool clodhopper trying to raise the toughest, meanest cattle in the world, and moving into gun country when he probably wouldn't have the guts to shoot a man in the head if he was being murdered.

I moved to the back side of the barn and fixed myself a bunk atop a feed stall under an open shed. That stall and shed were built, I'll say that. The crowdiest mustangs weren't going to tear that stall down. What Will did, he did solid.

He was right surprised that I'd moved out of my own doing, but not as happy about it as I'd expected. I could see what was turning over in his mind then. If I was strong enough to move and build a bunk, I was strong enough to ride along and let my dust settle. He didn't talk any more about cattle or his plans with me. He didn't ask me to ride out and see his herd and lands. Then the kid stopped following me all over and badgering me with questions about cowboys and bad men, and I knew something had been said.

To the woman, too. There was a new resistance in her for her husband, and a certain dark and reckless challenge. With me, she was sweet as honey, and when we'd be washing dishes together and our bodies touched, she'd kind of freeze all still a minute, waiting, hoping.

So I got rid of the boy and took her out riding one morning, but it was a bad morning. The heat rolled fierce and breathless up out of the desert, and a low, molten sky simmered overhead. It was one of those days when tempers fray and folks are edgy and nothing is funny and you get or make a wrong answer to everything that's said.

It wasn't my day, and I wasn't fool enough to try to force it. Then, worse luck, I thought Will spotted us from a distance while we were riding back. He came in early that day, glummer than usual. We had early supper, and he didn't say a word. But over coffee, he said to his wife, "I'll dry the dishes tonight. I want a talk with you."

I saw a woman's guards drop over her eyes, and there was guilt in her, but there was defiance too. I grinned to myself. It wasn't such big country that a man couldn't stop by for a visit. I might even get a better break with her if I weren't so handy.

CHAPTER TWO

The Flower

I WENT out to the barn and sat back in the deep shadows on a barrel, and I saw him start out of the house, no gun on and none in his hand, his face somber and nettled, but his steps slow, as if this were something he did not quite know how to do, and he regretted the necessity. The drum of fast hoofbeats throbbed on the sundown airs, and he stopped in the center of the yard and watched the trail that came down out of the open graze beyond his back fence.

Three riders came in, driving five lathered, wild-eyed cows from hell to breakfast. They stopped with hard bits. One was a mean-eyed old gila monster with cruelty in his face. The other two were smart aleck young bucks, hungry for trouble, and wanting to prove they were as tough as he was.

The old one roared out, "Connoyer, we are damn sick of driving back yore strays!"

Will Connoyer rooted and told them angrily, "They weren't on your graze. They were on open grass."

The old man gave an ugly laugh. "That is our graze now on account of we've done took it," he told Connoyer. "It's open range, but ours by right of most cows and most need of it. You get yore gol damned cows off there and keep 'em off, or we'll sweat 'em down so bad you'll think you've got a new crop of calves!"

"You get the hell off my land and stay off!" Connoyer answered, shaking with anger. He had temper enough to give him spunk, but he didn't know how to use it. He just stood there with his boots planted and his fists balled, and one of the boys was already toying with his rope, spreading his loop.

"Why, did you hear that invite?" the older man cackled at the two young bucks. "Sounds like he really meant it, boys! I reckon we owe it to him to let him see us leaving. Yessir, Will, we owe you that. We'll just help you walk along behind us and watch us over yore lines."

Connoyer's face was alternately streaking red and gray. He'd just wakened up to the fact they meant to give him a little rope dragging. If he made a bolt for the house, it would be just the story they'd like to tell of a Saturday at the crossroads. If he came back out with his scatter-gun, there'd be three throwdowns on him, and real lead whistling faster than he could throw those peashots. They wouldn't more than get stung, and he'd get shot up good.

His woman came to the doorway and shrilled, "You Murdochs do what he says and leave us alone, or we'll have the law on you!"

"Why, ma'am," the elder grunted with mock courteously. "You sound like you wanted to do that, and it's only fitten to oblige a lady." His slat mouth slit in a grin, and he winked at the boy with the loop.

I moved quietly to the barn door and leaned against the sill. I took my gun out and snapped a shot at the old man's saddle. I cut his pommel knob off, and it flipped up into his face, and he looked like a startled damnfool with blood rushing from his mouth.

He looked over and demanded rawly, "Who in hell put yore two bits in this?"

I blew the smoke from the end of my barrel, and wiggle waggled the gun. "Me," I said. "I was thinking of buying them same cows you just run in. I figure you've done me some personal damage."

The elder Murdoch's eyes blazed, but he didn't like my smell. He rasped, "Mister, you invited yoreself into the middle of this. If you visit around here long enough, mebbe we'll get the chance to return yore little greeting!"

I nodded. Beyond them the woman's face was alight with pride and excited approval. I was making the play for her. I told Murdoch, real pleasantly, "Right now is as good a time as any."

The two boys and Murdoch stiffened with caution. Then he hollered, "You with a throw down and us on Connoyer's land? We're not crazy! But we'll meet again, stranger!"

He was saving face and nothing more. He jerked his head at the boys, and they wheeled their ponies and dusted out of there fast. I spur-dragged out into the yard thumbing a fresh shot into my dead chamber. The girl's eyes twinkled like stars, and her face was flaming like the sunset.

"Oh, Tex, you handled them like they were bad kids!" she cried.

I shrugged. I looked at Connoyer. He hadn't moved and his fists were still balled, but he was looking at me with puzzlement and grudging respect. "If I'd done that, they'd have fought it out," he muttered. The comparison seemed to depress him. He swung abruptly on his heel and saddled up his pony and rode off to gather in the cows which'd stopped finally a half mile

up the slope not far from the river.

That left me alone with the woman. I crossed to her and took her by the elbow, and she was trembling. "Did I do all right?" I asked her.

"You were magnificent!" she murmured.

A man don't mind hearing that about himself, and I rolled a smoke and noted the way her breathing raced. She breathed, "Tex!" and then she breathed, "Don't. Not now!"

I gave her a hard, hungry look, and then I nodded, "Okay, but put it on tick."

She said with tumult, "I'll make us some lemon tea to cool," and she swung back into the kitchen.

I went up on the stoop and leaned a chair back on its legs with my boots braced against the rail. Connoyer drove the cows back and put them in the pasture. He came up onto the stoop with a heavy step. He was a man fighting with himself, and I thought the fight was about how to run me off after this, but that wasn't it. What he was fighting with was the puzzlement of how I could scare off the three Murdochs with a pure grandstand play like that had been while they weren't one bit afraid of him.

Nelly brought out refreshments, and we sat in silence a space watching the sundown, then suddenly Will Connoyer said, "Come in here, Tex," and went into the house and lighted the big lamp. He took his survey map off the wall and laid it in the circle of yellow light and pointed at a special place with a thick finger.

"Three days before you come," he said, "I had seven cows fattening for market right here. They strayed and I found 'em over here at Danger Crossing, three of 'em caught and drowned in quicksand."

"I saw them," I said.

He looked surprised. "You did?" Then he said, "Well, anyhow, do you figure cows would stray from here to there?"

I didn't need to study the map to give my answer, but the map was good and I did. There wasn't a way in the world that cows would have strayed down there by themselves. They'd have had to travel upgrade through barrens first, and cows don't do that.

I looked at him. I said, "You know the answer. Why you asking?"

He dumped down on a home made stool and wiped his forehead. "I don't know," he admitted. "I guess because I don't know what to do about it. I'm a peaceful man, but I'd fight if it would do any good. But there seven of them Murdochs, and there's plenty of mischief they can do."

HIS woman was listening from the doorway, but it was me she was watching, not him. So I put my two cents in again. "You want I should fix 'em Texas fashion?" I asked him.

"What will you do?" he grunted.

"That's my business," I said. "You ain't in it. But you may get blamed, and if you are, you'll have to stand up for yore claim that you don't know nothing."

I thought he paled a little, but just the way he had to think this out when there was nothing but *Yes or No* to think was enough to raise a man's contempt. His face set finally and he lifted his powerful hands and slapped them back upon his knees.

He said, "I don't want you getting in trouble on our account, but whatever you do is all right with me!"

I grinned and winked at his wife. I said to her, "We'll surprise him. We're going to put these yellow-bellied Murdochs in plave!"

Her eyes danced, and her face flamed, and she looked like she wanted to run across the room and kiss me. She said gaily, "Will, doesn't this call for a drink? We've still got plenty of blackberry brandy."

"By thunder, yes!" he agreed as if it were a momentous occasion. He got up snorting and went outside to go around

into the cellar. Nelly moved into the room, and I moved toward her, and the feelings running between us were like a flooding river carrying the molten reflection of a savage sundown.

Then the boy came skidding in from somewhere, babbling excitedly about the way the cows had been sweated down. His ma had to stop to listen to him and make decent answer, and then she told him to go help his pa. But the river of feeling was broken, and there was only the turbulence of cracked emotions, and before we could bring them together, Connoyer was coming back with his heavy step.

I guess that was the first drink he'd had in six months or a year. It turned him talky, and his wife grew irritated, but I listened to his big plans grinning, and then I found I wasn't grinning so much. He had some real ideas on breeding and irrigation. They weren't my kind of ideas, I wouldn't bother with the sweat and trouble. But they were damned good ideas, and I could see now why he was sweating twelve and fourteen hours a day outside when he had a pretty wife home just waiting.

But I didn't see how he could put the ideas over, for one simple reason. He could do the work, he could build the spread. With a proper bull, he might even build himself a herd. But he was a law-abiding and probably psalm-singing nester, and nothing would ever change him, and this was gun country, cow country, and nothing was going to change that for a good many years.

I didn't say that, but I thought it, and his wife smelled out my contempt. She reddened with shame, but some of my own feelings were in her eyes, except that she didn't even give him credit for having good sense. She thought he was just wasting time, wearing himself out to keep from facing his own defeat and failure. And she thought she was the one really taking the licking. She didn't have enough to do. There was no money to do things with. Even the curtains in the parlor were dyed and hand-worked flower bags. And at night he'd be so dead tired he couldn't even talk or laugh. She'd mentioned once, wistfully, that her folks had both a piano and an organ in their home, and another time mentioned how the porch used to be cluttered up with boys playing guitars and mandolins. There wasn't even a mouth organ in this house. And all of that she blamed on him.

I didn't care much, except in the way it bettered things for me, but I could see what had happened. He'd probably been a good farmer and solid man back in Ohio, and he'd seen the possibilities right here and rooted on their way through to California. Back in Ohio, he'd have made a go of this place. But here, the nature of the country and the people was too tough for a God-fearing man to handle, and he was trapped now by stubbornness and five years of sweat and trying to accomplish the impossible. Impossible for him, because no matter what he did to build his spread, tough-grained trash like the Murdochs would ride all over him in the end.

The girl had seen that early. She recognized that what made a man a man back in Ohio didn't follow in the West. And little by little, her blame had spread out to include all things that he thought or did, so that, now, she couldn't even see the good things that he'd done, and she thought the way he drove himself was just excuse to keep him working so hard he didn't have time to face his failure.

Same old story, I thought. Same things that turned so many of these nesters bitter with each other and ended up in downright hatred. But like I said, I didn't give a damn. It had set up a bull's eye, and a damned pretty one, for me to aim at.

Will Connoyer did most of the talking that night until he got too drunk, and then he was ready for bed. I looked back from the door. His wife stood at the fringe of

the wide circle of yellow coal oil light. She was watching us both. Her teeth were just touching, and her lips were a little parted and formed a hungry oval in her face as she looked at me. But her eyes were streaked with hard irritation and disgust for him.

I WENT out into the night grinning. I thought, Boy, yo're sure using up time, but yo're getting places and it's worth it! It struck me suddenly that even getting nothing, none of the old restlessness had been corroding in me. I was at ease with myself, almost contented, for the first time since the glory trail began wearing thin.

I whistled in my pony who was in fairly good shape again. He nickered and chewed at my ear and licked the salt sweat off my neck. He was missing me, for all that he was supposed to be mending up same as me. I figured, if he'd had his choice of staying out there alone much longer or riding me back across that desert firepit, he'd have picked the desert.

I saddled up, grinning and kind of perked up by the little excitement of what I meant to do. There was a nasty angle to it, but there was no way around it. The Murdochs had to be paid back in their own coin.

I rode up through shadows onto the open range, and, from the side of a slope, caught sight of their camp fire. Their cows were bedded down and peaceable. I could hear no sound of any circling rider, and figuring the Murdochs for what they were, it was a good bet that none of them were bothering to ride herd; they were all in there at their wagon camp.

Almost on the dot of midnight, the herd master heaved to his feet and shook himself, and the rest of the herd came up likewise for its midnight stretch. I moved through a fringe of cows opposite the campfire and figured I had located the little master. I started him moving, real easy, just riding Baldy alongside and nudging him and not even speaking. I lay low in the saddle so I cut no silhouette.

The cow snorted but started to move. Sure enough, it was the little master. Eight cows cocked their ears and looked at him, and then began plodding in his footsteps. I just walked those cows off nice and easy, keeping them in the thick shadows of the hollows. A mile away, I bunched them up a little and speeded their trail pace. I drove them right over the same trail the Murdochs had used with Connoyer's cows.

I came down to Danger Crossing and froze them on the bank. This was the nasty part, the part I didn't like to do. Slaughtering for meat or need is one thing. Slaughtering for sheer mayhem is something else.

I said, "Well, so long, doggies!" and let out a whoop and quirked the two back cows. The whole bunch went over the bank in a crowd jump. Their horns clattered before there came the splash. Then some of them were humping over solid fording, but four had gone off into the quick-sands and were humping themselves in deeper.

I drove the others across and left the four trapped and bawling. A cow's bawl sounds mighty like the same thing no matter what, but there was frenzied terror in those bawls tonight.

I put the others up onto the other bank. That was Murdoch graze. By a roundabout trail, they could reach the open grazelands just about as logically as Connoyer's cows could have done the same over his private lands. The point of this was that there'd be no proof against Connoyer any more than there had been against the Murdochs.

I rode back across the ford, turning my head from the floundering beasts. All of them were down by now, but trying desperately to catch their feet. One was no longer even trying to do that, but just stretched his head clear of the closing waters.

I rode back up onto the open range. The Murdoch fire was a dim orange eye against the solid blackness of a slope. Starshine made a white blob of their wagon top. I took my carbine out and put six shots bonging through their hanging cooking gear, and grinned at the way that stirred their camp up. They were hollering at each other like they were a mile apart. Somebody kicked at the fire, and instead of spreading the fire, it blazed up.

I sang out a laughing wahoo, and called across the herd, "Come and get me, Johnny Jones!"

A burst of shots came at me, falling short. I gave a long Texan yip and drummed off into the night. I stopped on a ridge a mile away and listened. I could hear vague movement back in the silence, but no drum of fast hoofbeats. Baldy was standing perky as a colonel's horse. He liked a little shooting and excitement and was ready for more of it.

There wasn't any more, and I touched him and walked him down grade to the home yard. I made reasonable noise putting him to pasture. I figured Connoyer would be thick with liquored sleep and snoring, but maybe his wife would come out onto the stoop.

I built a smoke and leaned against the corral bars, hoping the glow of my cigarette would draw her. I was sure I heard the stoop door open, but no movement broke the solid shadow. I finished my smoke and felt a little roiled but keyed up by it, and with a wry grin turned into my outside bunk. When I wakened in the morning, there was a little flower stuck into my hat. I damned her for not waking me and grinned like hell.

CHAPTER THREE

Magnificent!

CONNOYER was up at dawn and went about his business. I hung around the place all day, keeping a sharp eye on the trails and fences. Their challenge had been answered, and what they did now would show their fiber. If it had been me in their boots, I'd have cut the fences and run in Connoyer's damned herd on his own melons.

Nothing happened all day long except that there was a dust smudge over the open grade. Connoyer was late coming in, and it was full sundown before he came. He came up onto the stoop and stopped for a smoke before supper and got out the jug, and we each had a drink. He was looking a little perky but very puzzled.

He said, "There ain't a Murdoch cow left up back of my top fences."

Then suddenly he looked at me. "You have a finger in that, Tex?"

I said, "I don't know nothing," but I grinned so he knew I did. He was in a lather all the rest of the week to find out what I'd done. He found out Saturday when we drove down to the cross road meeting. At least, he found out that four Murdoch cows had been trapped and died in the quicksands.

The Murdoch clan was surly, ugly and knotted. They were making some broad, insinuating statements about the matter, but they were in a bad spot to find sympathy for they had to tell that it was the same place Connoyer's cows had gone in. A feeling of tension crept through the crowd, though. You could see men's eyes darting between me and Connoyer and the Murdochs with appraisal. No stockman feels very tolerant about animal slaughter, even another man's critters. Beyond that, trouble on the range for one means trouble for all, and you could feel the shifting kaleidoscope of their loyalties, and notice the unsettled opinion in the gathering and drifting apart of cliques.

Connoyer was half scared-stiff at the suspicion that he was involved, but filling slowly with a savage pride that he was getting credit for having answered their challenge like a bad man. The Murdochs

themselves knew the answer, of course. Their ugly looks were for me, but they were itchy for the chance to take it out on him.

Nelly was a little appalled by the idea of such ruthless slaughter, but she hadn't witnessed the real horror of it, and she was excited by the quick way I had cleared the open range of Murdochs and the careful, even if sullen, silence they maintained about me. She could read the whole story from what she heard.

"I hear," she murmured once, "that somebody put a flower in your hat the night you went out on a ride."

I gave her a challenging look. "A long ride deserves more than that."

She colored, but she liked what I said. "You're just as direct and ruthless in everything you do, aren't you, Tex?" she asked.

We bantered back and forth like that, roweling our stoked up feelings with snatched remarks between the hubbub of excitement that a meeting of lonely people causes. At sundown, the womenfolk called "Come and get it!" and watched avidly for the reactions to their own particular special cake or pie. The tension had put a streak of adventure and excitement into the meeting. The feud wasn't definite enough, it hadn't reached far enough, to cause bitterness and hatred except among the Murdochs.

There was hatred there, all right, smoldering so deep that they almost forgot Connoyer. They had him pegged too well, they knew he'd never have the sand even to be part of a trick like that. They'd take care of him at some later time, but right now, they'd have given the rest of those cows for the chance to hogtie me and toss me in those same quicksands.

Only, I wore my gun like a man used to using it, and I had slapped them with my open contempt twice. They didn't know quite how to get at me in a bunch, and none of them had the stomach to breast me single handed. They hadn't better have.

I hadn't figured I'd ever get a kick out of tinhorn fear and caution, but here with the girl soaking it all in and being affected by it, it really meant something. I could feel my chest swelling, and I soaked in her homage like a green kid, and I guess I did my share of strutting on account of I heard some woman whisper, meaning it for compliment, "He's arrogant as a king!"

Nelly heard it too, and that didn't sit bad with her at all. For all that she was married, I was earmarked as her man. Connoyer showed no slightest jealousy. The thick-witted strawbird thought I'd done the whole thing for him.

He wasn't denying knowing anything about the matter of the cows so vehemently now. He was kind of enjoying the grudging respect that floated on the surface of their suspicions. He was red-faced and a little loud of voice and acquiring a contemptuous expression in the way he looked at the Murdochs. Men had whispered that he'd turned out to be a bad hombre when crossed. They'd given him the reputation, and he was beginning to believe it himself. And he was drinking, and he wasn't used to drinking rotgut.

His wife saw what was happening to him with amused contempt. The fiddles struck up, and I swung her off into a dance. The meeting was held in a grove of trees by a river, and all around the dance space, the shadows were heavy, and, when the dancers wanted to cool, they'd stroll through the grove to the bank of the river.

I asked her if she'd like to cool, and I could tell from her pause that she was speculating on the gossip that would come of it. Then she saw her husband making some big, self-important declaration about something, and her lip curled a little and her head lifted and she said, "It would be nice."

I took her elbow and walked her through the shadows, and I pulled her body close

and could feel her trembling. I found a place where the bank was cut away in a low step, and I jumped down and put up my arms to lift her down, and her weight seemed like a feather.

I held her off her feet, eye to eye, a moment. She looked straight at me, her eyes like dark pools reflecting starlight. There was no smile upon her lips and her mouth formed a torn oval against the paleness of her face.

"Tex," she murmured, "I'm not a bad woman."

I said, "I know. I knew it that first day."

ACTUALLY, I hadn't and hadn't given a damn either way. But now I knew, and that much was honest. She had a lot of grit. Another woman would have run away.

I put her down onto her feet and slipped my hands up to her shoulders. She looked up at me without trying to draw away. She came to some inward decision, satisfied by what I'd said, I guess. I drew her against me, and her body was like a trembling flame, and everything a woman could promise a man was in that kiss.

She said finally, regretfully, "We'd better go back now."

I nodded but asked, "What happens after this?"

She looked down, and I think she bit her lip. She'd come of good family, and this was a big jump for her to take. She said, "It is going to be difficult, but I'll let you know straight out."

"How?" I asked. I was pawing like a stallion.

She looked at me then and managed a little laugh. "You found your flower, didn't you?"

I grinned, and the tension of the kiss was cracked. I lifted her back up onto the upper step and we strolled back and mixed into the dance. Will Connoyer was arguing breeding with a bunch of thick-gutted farmers. I said to Nelly, "I bet he never argued like that before."

"No," she admitted, "he didn't." Then she added, "I don't think they'd have listened!"

We saw him accept another drink, and it was clear that he'd be hazy before the night was through and likely sleeping like a log long before we reached home. She was disgusted by it because she didn't think he was entitled to the self-importance he was giving himself on the strength of respect garnered by an act he hadn't even known about and would never had had the grit to be part of himself.

I pressed my advantage. I told her, "When we leave here tonight, the Murdochs are licked if they've made no trouble. I know the breed. They don't ask for another whipping."

She pressed my hand, and her breath caught in her throat. "You don't know what it means to be free of them!" she murmured. "Maybe Will would see some sense if he didn't feel he was being run out!"

Then she looked full at me and said, "Tonight?" as if questioning, but after that full look, her eyes dropped, and her hands went a little chill.

Somebody captured her for the next dance, and I strolled around among the men feeling pretty good. I had my gun checked at the lemonade stand. Not dancing, some of the Murdochs were wearing guns. I thought of that, but they'd shown nothing but sullen brooding, and I was half drunk myself with the lingering feelings of her kiss and thought of what lay ahead.

I didn't bother to get it, and shortly forgot it as none of the Murdochs made any slightest move in my direction. I had a few drinks and talked at random with the men, moving around a lot because my thoughts weren't on any conversation, or anything else but Nelly.

I was leaning against a shed enjoying a

cigar when I felt the hard stab in my back and the elder Murdoch appeared beside me. He gave a wicked grin and said, "That gun's cocked and I've got the derringer here that will be found on you if we have to do a shooting. Just come along quiet, outlander. We want to show you a place you may recall—Danger Crossing!"

I couldn't see how many there were, but I could hear the breathing of three or four, and I could smell the heavy sour fumes of liquor and feel the hatred beating out of them. And that steel circle was shoved hard against me. There wasn't much to do.

I damned myself for day dreaming, and my jaws set hard. I figured I'd get a chance for action on the ride, but it slapped a man's pride to be caught like this, and it went against the grain to be taken without even a fight.

The gun jabbed me and Murdoch took my elbow. "Just turn right around and walk for the horses," he ordered.

I turned, and we started forward and then I heard a bellow and the pound of two heavy steps and out of the tail of my eye, saw the man with the gun fly out from behind me like a stone flies out of a sling-shot. The elder Murdoch let out an oath and pivoted, reaching for his gun.

I wheeled, cracking him on the neck and crashing him against the shed wall. I caught my first look at things and saw Will Connoyer with a Murdoch in each arm, trying to squeeze them together like you would two sacks. He didn't know how to fight, but he was powerful, and now he was wild and roiled, and his hands and arms were being guided by sheer instinct.

I hit one of his men on the jaw and saw him go limp in Will's arms, then somebody had me around the neck from behind. I buckled my knees and reached back over my shoulder then straightened and yanked as I doubled forward, and one of the younger Murdocks flew over my head.

It was a grunting, cursing melee now, with other men on both sides running to join in. We were badly outnumbered, and for a few minutes I had my hands full. I was badly banged up, enough to work up my bile and grit, and I was already feeling violent when I saw the elder Murdoch straightening up the side of the shed and reaching for his gun again.

I slammed clear of the two Murdochs I was fighting with and drove a flying fist right into the old man's middle. He gave a blast of painful breath, and the blow numbed him for the instant, and I slapped his hand loose and grabbed his gun and shot him.

The bark of the pistol slammed through the fight and seemed to freeze it. The old man was sinking slowly against the wall, but he was plenty alive and reaching for his side pocket, and this time I shot him in the head. Will yelled a warning, and I spun on two younger Murdochs drawing their guns, and I blazed at them, slugging them in the belly, then stood over them and shot each in the belly again.

LONG after, I remembered that I had heard the suck of men's breaths like the suck of a great rising wind. Right then I wasn't hearing anything but the shriek of the black violence in me. I kicked the guns away from the two downed Murdochs. Out of habit, I blew the smoke free of the gun I held, but I held it cocked and ready and looked around for the rest of them.

There were no more. Will Connoyer had finished them off with sheer brute brawn. There was a dead silence over the camp, broken only by the rasp of our breathing and some baby's caterwauling. The men in camp were a tough-grained lot, but most of them stepped back from me slowly like haze sinking into the hills toward sundown.

I made a gesture and threw down the gun. I said harshly, "Old Murdoch was drawing."

Nobody disputed it. One graybeard said, "Yes, I saw it." But nothing changed within the crowd. Nobody was calling me wrong, but they were frozen with the shock of witnessing violent death and the cold-blooded second shots I had put into the Murdoch boys.

A horse doctor was hustling to rip away their clothes. Will was staring down at them with bulging eyes.

He said, "Well, they made the trouble, and Tex was in the right. Somebody'd best send for the sheriff, though. He'll find me and Tex out at my place."

He gave me a sobered, horrified stare but jerked his head and turned through the crowd. I collected my gun and got my pony. I rode to the side of their dust, and I could see both their figures, stiff as ramrods in the moonlight.

I went to the corral, and Will helped his wife down at their door and then drove the wagon across to the shed. He brought the ponies over and put them through the bars. I stood fiddling with my bridle. "Why did you butt in?" I asked.

He spit and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "On account of they had a throwdown on you, I guess," he said. "I don't know exactly why, Tex, it just struck me that after what you'd done for us, I should be with you."

"You know you were chancing those same guns?" I asked.

He looked at me with puzzlement. "What would that have to do with it?"

I said grudgingly, "Will, yo're all right. Yo're all man. Go quiet yore wife. I can hear her sobbing."

He turned over to the house, and I sank into the shadow of the shed. They came out after a time and sat on the steps of the stoop. They were talking low, but I could hear them.

He said somberly, "Well, I guess you were right, Nelly. This ain't our kind of land. I never figured to be mixed up in a killing, but now I'm just as much to blame as Tex. We pull out as soon as we can."

She said fierily, "No! Will, you were magnificent, and everybody will say so! You went in there with your bare hands."

He shook his head and expelled a weary breath. "We'll push along like you always wanted," he said. "Tex won this fight for me, but there'll be others in the future, and I ain't the man to handle them. Beside that, you hate this place."

GUN THE MAN DOWN!

by Gordon D. Shirreffs

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She clutched his big arm up near the shoulder. I could hear her sobs. "Will," she cried, "I never knew what it meant before! I never knew how much I loved my man!"

He looked around at her slowly, as if trying to locate some sound he'd heard out of jumbled hills. "You love me, Nelly? After all I've put you through? After this?"

"More than ever after this!" she told him.

He stood up, bent at the knees and bent forward and looking grotesque. He gave a clap of his hands that exploded like a pistol shot. "Why the Lord forgive me for what I been thinking, then! I don't give a whoop about giving this place up and rolling. We'll start again in Californy!"

She came to her own feet. She said fiercely, "We'll stay right here!"

He straightened as he reached for the dream, but then his shoulders slumped and he dumped down upon the steps again. "No," he muttered, "I just ain't man enough to whip this country, Nelly. I saw that tonight."

I came out of the shadows and crossed to them. I said, "Will, I ain't ever told any other man living he was a better man than I am. I tell it to you now. You've got all my grit and something more. You've got the fairness not to abuse it."

I looked at the girl, her face down cast and biting her underlip with memory of that kiss and promise. "And you've got something still more I'd give my right arm to have," I said. "You've got a woman who loves you and understands you now. Mebbe you try real hard, you'll understand yoreself."

I turned back to the corral. He bolted to his feet and barked, "Tex, where you going?"

"On my way," I said. "I've learned something mighty fine tonight after wasting most of my life. Mebbe I can use it."

I saddled up and rode out into the yard. I snagged out a poke of gold. I said, "I want to leave a little present for the boy. I want he should own himself a bull, a good one. I want he should take care of that bull himself, Will, so he'll learn early the difference betwixt a cowboy and a bad man."

The woman came slowly from the stoop with her voice catching in her throat. She said, "Tex, I want to tell you something. You're a true and honest man, deep down. You're solid salt. You're our own."

I'd thought that everything a woman could ever offer a man had been in that earlier kiss. I was wrong. There was something in her tone that damned few men ever get. I damned near choked with feelings and simply wigwagged because I couldn't talk right then. I touched my spur to Baldy. When I looked back from the turn, they were waving a lamp.

I had to clear my throat, and then I stiffened, and then I yelled back hoarsely, "Yahoo! Don't forget yore Texan, folks!"

Will's voice boomed through the whole valley, "This is your home any time you ever come back, Tex!" Then he sucked for wind and blasted a yipping yahoo like he'd heard me do.

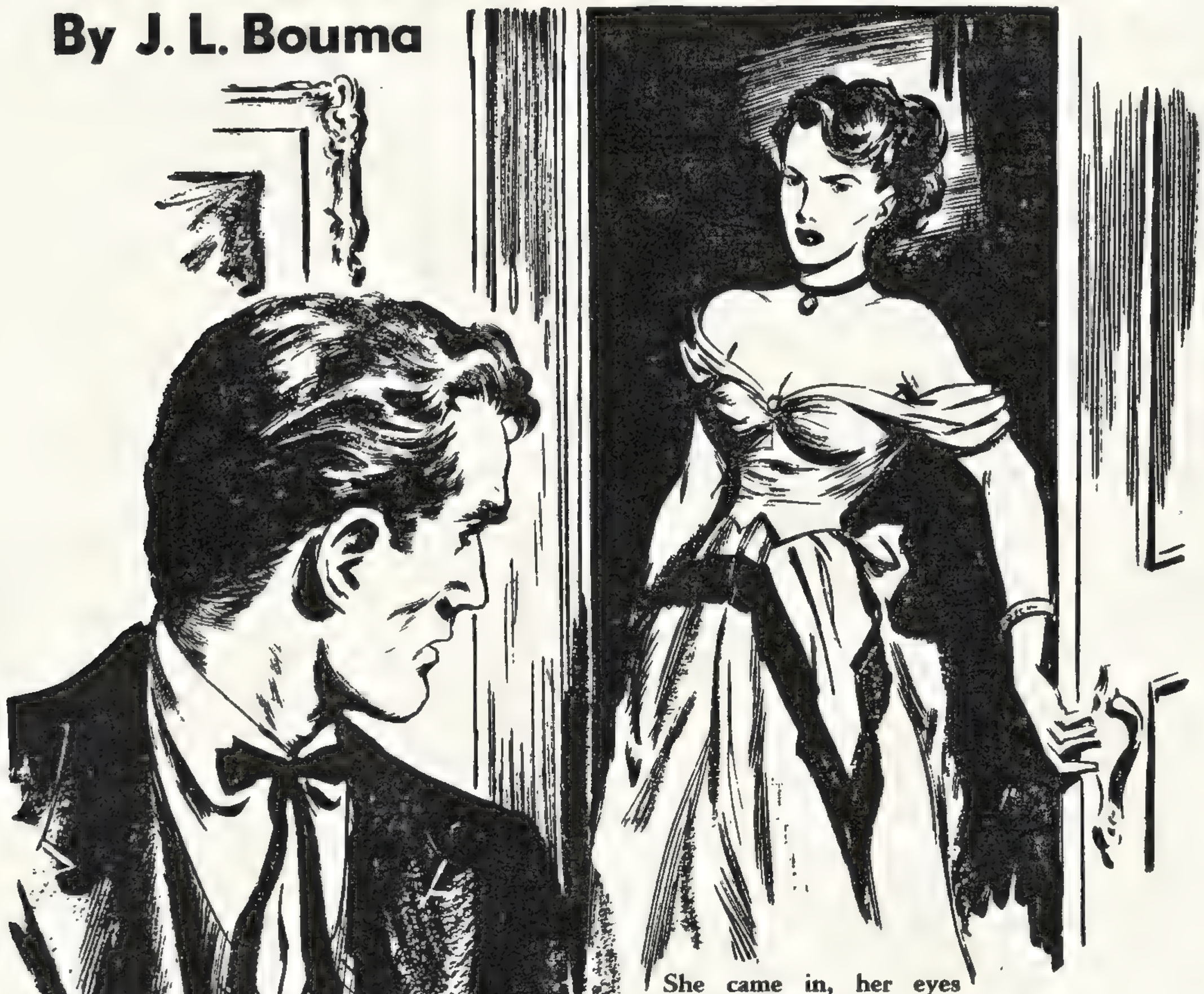
I grinned, and my throat grew full, and I cussed and put Baldy into a run. I felt awful sad, but pretty good. I felt good with myself, and still I felt humble. I'd learned a heap about myself and life from those two folks. And I was glad I hadn't gotten the girl. I was glad she'd turned back to her husband.

Just being glad about it somehow made me pretty contented with myself. None of that old black restlessness corroded through me. No dissatisfaction drove me. Hell, I'd amble back to Texas and begin where I knocked off.

From now on, just cows were good enough for me. Unless, of course I could find me a little old gal of my own like that one! ★ ★ ★

Gambler's Gal

By J. L. Bouma



She came in, her eyes flashing angry sparks. . . .

"You're riding high now," Glenda told him, "stepping on those that get in your way. But just remember, one of these days somebody will step on you—and you won't live to step back!"

VANCE CARMON buttoned his flowered waistcoat and reached into the closet for his knee-length box coat. Then he noticed the bullet hole in the sleeve, and he chuckled wryly, having until then completely forgotten the drunken young fool responsible for the damage. Slipping another coat from its hanger, he laughed against this apathy toward his own life.

He brushed his thick hair in front of the mirror, thinking absently that his features were losing that lean hardness of youth. He reminded himself to eat less and to spend more time outdoors.

Woo Sam came from the kitchen bear-

ing the silver coffee service as Vance entered the sunny front room and seated himself at the window overlooking the main street. He eyed the tempting platter of kidneys, the ham and eggs, with regret. "Just coffee this morning, Sam." He slapped his belly. "Getting soft and fat."

"You no soft, Mr. Ca'mon. Last night man come with gun. Boom!" Woo Sam's cackle filled the room. "You knock man down."

"That's nothing to be proud of. Has Miss Frank had her breakfast?"

"She no want." Woo Sam paused. "She cry most all night."

Vance glanced out of the window, annoyed that Glenda had taken their quarrel seriously, saw John Beam cross over from his office, and he thought with grim humor, My silent partner.

Beam came up the back stairs a few minutes later. He was big and pompous, about forty, with a shock of graying hair; he was a lawyer who had once acted as district judge, and the title still clung to him.

He entered as Woo Sam picked up the breakfast tray, and his voice was jovial as he said, "Put that tray down, boy. I can do with a few of those kidneys." He grinned at Vance and filled a plate. "Damn near noon. Hell of a time for a man to be eating his breakfast, even a gambling man."

Vance took a thin cheroot from his vest pocket. He lighted it and regarded John with faint irony. John Beam's pompous air hid an instinctive shrewdness.

Vance wondered what was the reason for the lawyer's call, for he rarely visited the Oriental saloon, and never on business. Maybe he had reconsidered Vance's last offer to buy him out. John looked up and said, "I came about that shooting last night. That kid, Jim Bowers."

"What about him?"

"Well, here's a young fellow that scratches the year around. Yesterday he drove in a small herd and sold off. He cashed his check and came in for a drink—"

"A drink, hell. He had to have six or seven. Then he had his look at the girls and tried his luck with the wheel. And when he woke up to the fact that he was broke, he wanted his money back." Vance spewed a cloud of smoke. "Crazy fool came in the office and pointed a gun at me. I told him to get out, and he pulled trigger. So I had Barnett throw him in jail. Anything wrong in that?"

"No. But it seems those cows weren't all his. Half of them belonged to Cleve Ames, who's going to marry Bowers' sister. It's more than just this boy making a fool play, and a lot of people will feel the same way."

Vance grinned. "What's wrong with you, John? Kicking because you're making money?"

"Well, the boy asked to see me," John shrugged. "I'd like to know where you stand, Vance. You're either going to have to file charges or have Barnett turn him loose."

"I won't file charges."

"Fine." The lawyer paused. "Tell you what, though—teach the kid a lesson if you make him worry the day out in jail. Let me handle it. I'll stop by the jail this evening and tell Barnett to let him go. How much did he drop?"

"Twenty-four hundred."

John shook his head. "I wish it hadn't happened. It just might put both those boys under."

Vance smiled faintly. "I'll tell you what we can do. Chip in twelve hundred apiece and give it to them."

"Oh, no, I'm not putting out of my own pocket."

Vance grinned. Two passions ruled John Beam's life: money and power. He had smelled profit when Vance had come to town to open a small saloon and card room. He had made it a point to meet Vance and had offered to back him in enlarging the place, and adding such gambling equipment as needed. The girls had come later, en-

riching an already profitable partnership. Vance thought wryly of the times he had gone to John's big house on the hill with John's monthly share of the profits. He had never cared for this behind-the-barn way of doing business.

HE SAID now, "Why so interested in getting Bowers out of jail?"

A faintly patronizing smile crossed John's face. "Well, I guess you know the senator is coming to town tomorrow." He hesitated. "My business isn't enough to hold me down, Vance. I'm cut for bigger things. In a word, politics."

"And with the senator retiring at the end of his term—"

John grinned. "You catch on fast. I can tell you this, Vance, politics is a game the average person knows nothing about. People vote for a man they like, and it's the small things, like helping young Bowers out of a jam, that make people like you."

"Sort of counting your votes ahead of time, aren't you?"

John Beam shrugged. He pushed his plate aside. "Bowers wasn't my only reason for coming here. That last offer you made me—does it still hold?"

"Changed your mind about getting out, eh?"

"I have no choice, Vance. A man has to burn his bridges when he makes a change in life. Anyway, I expect to be in Washington this time next year." He gave Vance a sly grin. "Wouldn't up your offer five thousand, would you? Campaigning will cost me a big piece of money."

"Twenty-five thousand. That's fifteen more than you put in, and you've been collecting every month." Vance rose. "You want it now?"

"I have too much to do today, Vance. I'm giving a reception for the senator, and I want it to run off smoothly. Just bring the money to the house as usual. Make it around nine this evening."

Vance chuckled dryly. "At the back door as usual? I'll be waiting for you."

John flushed. He rose heavily. "Hell, man, it's a business arrangement, isn't it?"

Vance said lightly, "Of course." He paused to grin faintly, and added, "This country'll go to hell fast if you have many arrangements like this in Washington."

John grumbled something and went down the inside back staircase. Vance finished his cigar thoughtfully and turned to the door. He stood at the top of the stairs and looked down on the large hall, smelling last night's spilled whisky, stale lamp and tobacco smoke. There were only a few men at the bar, and Vance called down, "Kind of quiet, Mike."

The bartender looked up. "I'll pick up."

Vance nodded. There was no satisfaction of looking over the Oriental of a morning. It was at night, when the lamps burned bright and the girls in their colorful dresses mingled with the customers, when the wheels whirled and clicked and rough talk and laughter echoed from the high ceiling, that a man felt at home.

And yet the thought of endless nights to come seemed suddenly meaningless. Just like a damn wheel, Vance thought. Round and round and never getting anywhere. Was there nothing else to living?

He strode abruptly along the balcony to the end door, and he knocked softly. The door opened, and Glenda Frank looked at him, her handsome face faintly hostile. "I told you last night—"

"That you were leaving," Vance grinned.

"I meant to say a great deal more, too." She held a silk wrapper at her breast, and there was something of regret, something of sorrow in her dark eyes. "I'm just one of Vance Carmon's girls. No one will miss me, least of all the boss himself. My kind come and go, isn't that right?"

"Don't belittle yourself," he said, and stepped quickly inside. For a moment she fought his embrace, but when his mouth found hers she melted like wax. She pushed him away finally.

"I'm still leaving. When we met, I took a step up because you made me feel wanted in a way I'd almost forgotten. Now I'm beginning to lose that feeling."

"One of these days we'll leave together."

"I've heard that before, too. You'll never break away from this life, and one day it will kill you."

Vance didn't answer. He was only part of her reason for wanting to leave, and he knew it. The respect she sought was denied her in this town. It was ironic that she had kept this hidden from herself until she had fallen in love with him. Now she wanted to burn her bridges. Like John Beam was burning his. Vance said, "When will you leave?"

"I'm taking the midnight train to San Francisco. I need the ocean. Maybe just seeing it will make me feel clean."

"You've no reason to feel any other way," he said angrily. He turned to the door, but she called him back. She took a box from the dresser and turned to him, somehow embarrassed.

"I've seen you carry those thin cigars of yours in your vest pocket for so long that—" She thrust the box at him. "Here! I had the silver smith make it up for you."

He opened the box and looked at a cigar case of hammered silver. He smiled in a strained way. "Thank you, I appreciate this."

She blushed. "Well, you've given me enough things—"

He put what cigars he had with him in the case, and he grinned at her as he slipped it into his inside coat pocket. "I'll carry it here next to my heart."

HE REMEMBERED the words later, working at his roll-top desk in his office. Foolish words, powdered with sentimentality, but her gesture had touched him briefly. It had been years since anyone had given him a gift without expecting something in return.

It was still daylight when Woo Sam announced a visitor. Vance, half turned in his chair, frowned at the woman in the doorway. He rose as she came inside, her eyes steadily on his and faintly smiling.

"I had to see you, Mr. Carmon," she said. "I'm Rebecca Bowers, and I'm here because of Jim and—yes, something else, too."

Anger forced him to say, "You have no business coming here."

"Are you in a position to judge?" She glanced at a chair, and he asked her gruffly to sit down. She was a lovely girl, with the bloom of youth still on her, but her large gray eyes were mature and composed. It was only at second glance that Vance saw their betrayal, their quick flash of anxiety and desperation.

"You'll not help your reputation by coming here," Vance said stiffly. He remained standing. "As for your brother, the young fool will be released tonight. I suggest you go to the hotel and wait for him."

Her relief was obvious. "I—didn't know. Cleve and I only received word this morning, and we came straight here."

"And does this Cleve know you're here?"

"No, Mr. Carmon. He mustn't ever know."

"Because I assure you that if I were in his shoes and you came up here—"

She flushed. "You are not in his shoes, sir! I came here to do something I know he'll never do, and that is to ask you to loan us the money Jim lost. We desperately need it. Without it we might as well pack up and move on."

"I'm sorry—I'm not a banker. If a man is fool enough to lose his stake at my tables, I'll not be another fool and lend it back to him."

"You'd be paid."

"Perhaps in three or four years. Meanwhile I can have that same twenty-four hundred dollars working for me day in and day out." He gave her a short nod of dismissal, half turning to the door. But she did not rise. A flush stole up her cheeks.

"The money means a great deal to us. It's life itself." She rose now, her eyelids heavy, her lips faintly parted, and she came to stand in front of him. "Is there a way I can tell you—"

"No," he said, the word wretched and strange to his ears. He did not look at the girl's eyes lest what she had offered lay naked between them. He opened the door, and Woo Sam came to usher her down the back staircase. As he closed the door, Glenda came through the door that connected her apartment and the office.

She came in, her eyes flashing angry sparks. Before he could speak, she said, "Refusing her was contemptible! Here—" She placed something on his desk—the bracelet he'd given her what now seemed a long time ago. "Twenty-four hundred is about what you paid for this, isn't it? Sell it if you're so hard up, and give her the money."

"Damn it, Glenda, you're being foolish."

"You've brushed a number of people aside lately by calling them fools. But that's easy to do, isn't it, when a dollar means more than a human being? You're riding high now, and stepping on those that get in your way. Well, just remember that one of these days someone out of fear or hatred will step on you."

Vance looked at her with a face that was hard as stone.

"Oh god, I didn't want it to end this way," she said dully. "But I've seen the change come over you, and I wanted to stop it. Now it's too late."

Then she said, "I'd better start packing."

And left Vance staring at a closed door.

He had his supper, and afterwards went downstairs to check the register. It was still too early for the girls, but the big room was already crowded with men, lining the bar, playing faro, poker and roulette.

Mike came over and said, "That feller Cleve Adams sold a couple his horses and is making a stake playing high card with Jordan."

Vance lit a cigar and wandered over there. A dozen men were watching, and Vance glanced over a shoulder at Cleve Ames, seeing the tense line of the young man's jaw, the way his eyes followed Jordan's nimble fingers as they shuffled the deck.

Ames cut. He pushed three stacks of double eagles to the center of the table, and Jordan matched them. Then Jordan flipped over a Queen of spades, and a little smile touched Jordan's lips.

Ames turned a card, the King of diamonds, and someone said, "Five in a row. Looks like he's got you on the run, Jordan."

Ames fingered the stacks of gold coins with nervous fingers, and Vance found himself wishing the man would quit while he was ahead.

"Must be two thousand in that pot," someone said softly.

Ames turned up a nine of hearts and his mouth thinned down to a hard line, then opened slowly on a soft sigh as Jordan flipped up a four of hearts.

Ames' lean cheeks were flushed. And Vance knew the man was seeing the gold in front of him in terms of countless hours of hard work, skimpy meals and worn clothing, days on end in the saddle, seeing in it a thousand wishes and hopes. And now the fever was on him because the chance was there to double all this at one turn of a card— Or lose it, Vance thought. His voice was rough in the silence. "You're even, Ames. If you're smart you'll quit."

Ames half turned in his chair. "So that's it. You were glad enough to win the money from Jim, but now that I'm having a little luck—"

"Luck don't last." Vance said the surprised look on Jordan's face.

Ames' lip curled. "You weren't this kindly disposed toward Jim last night."

Vance knew then he had gone too far, and that none of them understood. Very well. He said coldly, "Cover his bet, Jordan."

JORDAN cut a five of clubs, and a little sigh rose from the watching men. Ames cut quickly and confidently, but sickness spread across his face when he saw the card. It was a deuce of spades. Jordan, his smile thin, gathered in the pot, and Ames looked at nothing while his world tumbled.

He rose finally in the silence, glanced once at Vance with eyes that were suddenly bleak, and turned to walk out.

"I don't like it," Mike said softly, at Vance's shoulder. "I don't like that way he was looking at you."

Vance shrugged. He glanced at his watch; it was half past eight. "I'll be gone for a while. Take care of things, Mike."

He opened the big safe in his office and took out the cash box. He used the tiny key on his watch chain to unlock it, and counted out twenty-five thousand dollars in large bills. There was double that amount in the box, and he fingered it idly. All that money. Why was he so dissatisfied?

He put the cash box back, took a derringer from one of the compartments, and slipped it into his coat pocket. He closed and locked the safe, then slipped the money into an envelope, and went down the back stairs to the alley. Beam's house was only three blocks away, on the hill, and Vance walked through the darkness with his long stride, and he tried to find within himself the good feeling that should be his at the knowledge that he would soon be sole owner of the Oriental.

But the mood within him was dark, and his heart was gray walking through the early night.

John Beam himself answered the door. In the lamplight his silk maroon robe brushed the tips of his polished boots. "Come in, Vance." He took the offered envelope and smiled. "There's no need to count it. One thing, we've always trusted each other. Time for a drink?"

"Not tonight, thanks."

"Oh, come now, men can't dissolve a partnership without a little smile." Beam filled two small glasses from the decanter. "The last bottle of my best, Vance. Drink up. Good brandy is rare in this country."

Beam was part of it, Vance thought. Part of the dark mood. Beam, who had made a lot of money behind the scenes, would, one day soon, help govern the country. The knowledge left a bad taste.

Beam was jovial tonight, but a trifle restless. He kept glancing at his gold watch. Vance took the hint gladly. He stopped by the back gate to light a cigar, then strolled slowly down the hill. Below him lamplight showed through back windows of the main street, and there were stars. It was a town, one of thousands. A place to eat and sleep, to maybe die, Vance thought. But there was something else. He could feel it, thinking about Glenda, and it wasn't San Francisco, which was also a place. It was something that went beyond gambling, beyond money matters, that had to do with living and growth. Maybe that was it. Growth. Maybe that was what Glenda was groping toward, unable to put it in words, but the feeling there to grow and not be stagnant waiting to die.

Vance entered the mouth of the alley, and he was smiling.

Thunder crashed in the shed that smelled strongly of manure and horses. A tiny flame lanced out, and its force was a hammer against his chest. It slammed him to the ground amidst far-reaching shouts, and he scarcely knew that the derringer was in his hand, jerking in his hand. A flickering hole opened in the blackness, and came bobbing toward him. Many boots scuffed the alley, and somewhere a woman screamed. The flicker became a lantern that lowered to his face, and a voice said, "It's Carmon."

"Here's the marshal. Hey, Barnett, somebody got Vance Carmon. You think it was that Bowers kid? I seen him going down the alley a while ago."

"No. Carmon asked to see Bowers. That's why he come here. I watched, just in case. Shot came from the shed."

"There he goes!"

And Barnett shouting, "You there! Stop and reach!"

And from far away, "Hell, it's the judge! Judge Beam! He's hit!"

There were more lanterns, then hands on Vance, and Glenda's voice, "Careful, boys! Easy—"

Vance jerked his legs. He could feel blood running along his skin, but there was nothing wrong with him. He knew it. "All right, all right, I'll walk if you don't mind."

Glenda removed his coat, the flowered waistcoat, the shirt of fine silk. The bullet had grooved the chest, nothing more. Vance shook his head. "He always was a bad shot."

Barnett was there. "You hit him in the stomach, but the Doc says he'll live. Why did he do it, Vance?"

"He wanted to burn his bridges, all of them." He smiled at Glenda. "He did it out of fear, my silent partner about to enter politics. He wanted to wipe the slate clean—with my blood, of course. I'm glad he won't get to Washington."

The doctor came and bandaged the wound. "No worse than a cut finger."

Vance said to Barnett, "I didn't ask to see Bowers. But I'll see him now. Where is he?"

BOWERS came in, young and thin and frightened. "The judge said as soon as the marshal turned me loose to go down the alley and wait for you at the back stairs. He said you wanted to see me." There was a little hope in the boy's face.

"You see, Barnett?" Vance poured a drink for himself, feeling the bandage tight at his chest. "If Beam had killed me, Bowers here would have got the blame."

"I was there—"

"You might not have been." Vance downed his drink. "Never mind. It's finished now." Barnett went out, Bowers lingered. Vance turned to Glenda. "You're packed?"

She looked at him. "Yes."

"I'll see you off."

She went out then, leaving Vance and Bowers alone. Vance said, "Come along."

He led the way to his office, where he counted out twenty-four hundred dollars. "Take it. Collect your sister and her man and get out of town."

"Mr. Carmon—"

"Get! And let's hope you learned a lesson." He smiled. "Give your sister my compliments."

He sat at his desk and wrote for some time; he called Woo Sam and gave instructions. ". . . with Miss Frank's luggage. Have it taken to the station, Sam."

Later, he went downstairs. "Mike! Do you have a twenty dollar gold piece?"

Mike frowned. "Sure."

"Give it here. Now call Jordan." Jordan came. "Sign this, please. Both of you." They signed, looked at each other, at Vance, who was grinning. "The place is yours. All I ask is that you run it the way I ran it—straight. And no silent partners."

The train was due, and Glenda was waiting, looking lovely in a green corduroy traveling dress, and cape. A jaunty feather rode high on her hat. They walked slowly to the station and were standing on the platform when the train chugged in. "Well, Vance—"

"I'll see you aboard."

Sitting opposite her on the plush seat in the lamplight, he smiled when the conductor's call reached them. "All aboard!"

"Vance, you'd better go before—"

"I'm going," he said.

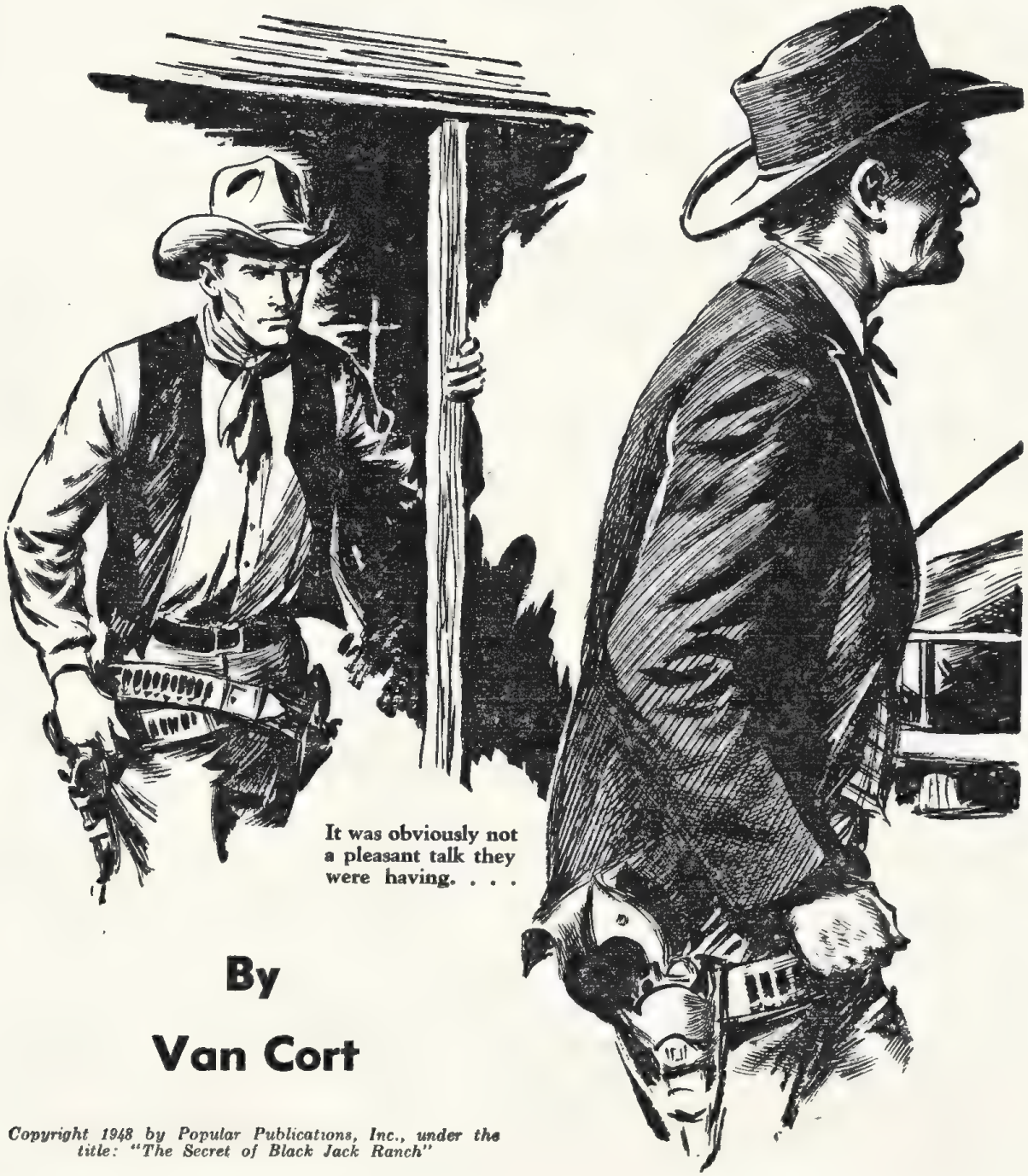
Then she saw what he meant, and she started to cry.

"Listen," he said, as the train jerked forward and began to roll, "I've got enough to start us up in some kind of business, and it won't be that kind. You understand?"

"I almost died thinking of going on alone—"

"Hold your head up," he said. "You're not alone. You'll never be alone." ★ ★ ★

BLACK JACK WOMAN



It was obviously not a pleasant talk they were having. . . .

By

Van Cort

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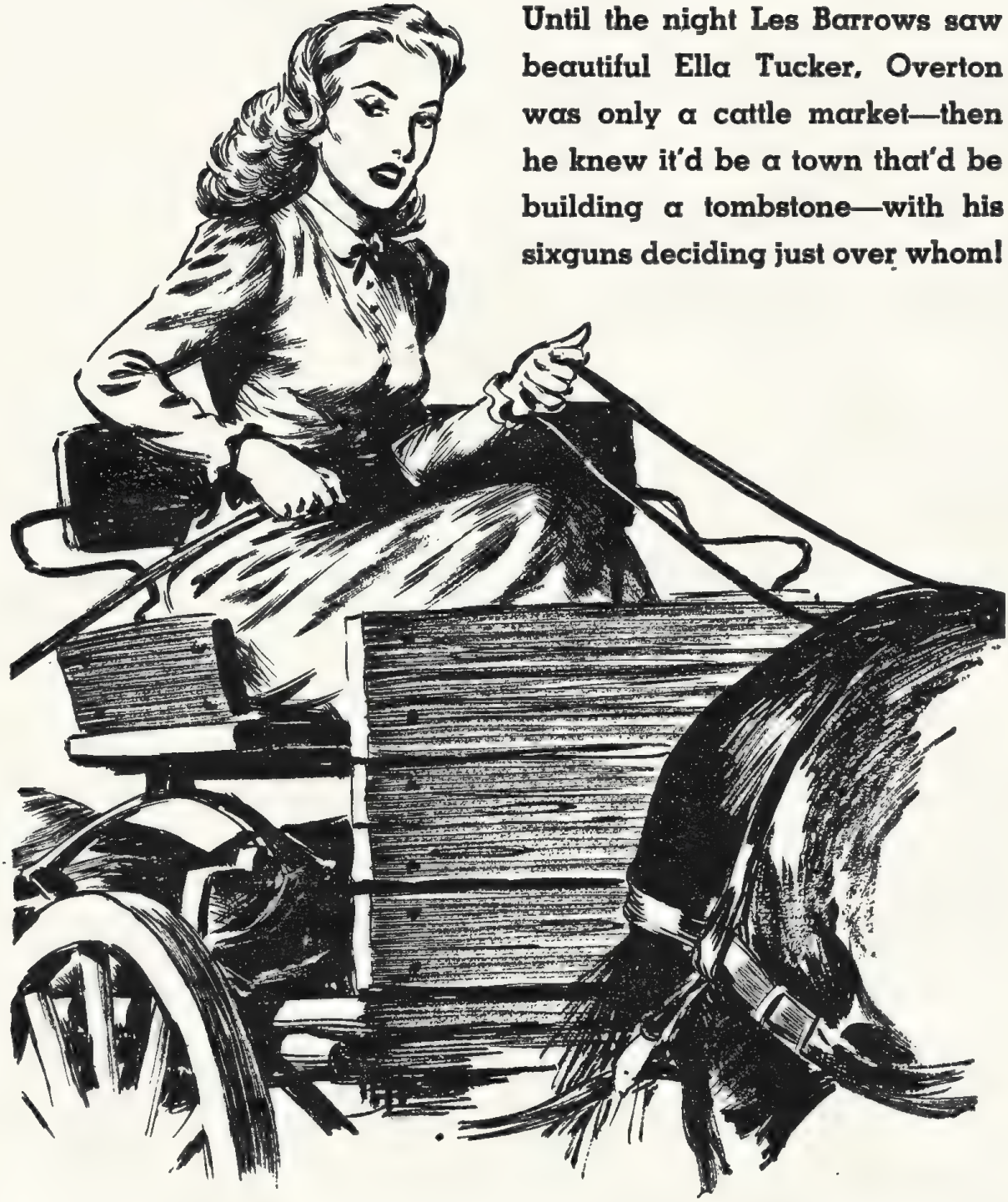


Until the night Les Barrows saw beautiful Ella Tucker, Overton was only a cattle market—then he knew it'd be a town that'd be building a tombstone—with his sixguns deciding just over whom!

UNTIL the night Lester Barrows saw the woman, the town of Overton was only a place where he might sell his cattle. He and Old Amos, who had nursed that scratch herd along on nothing for more than a year, drifting it from county to county and across more than one state line, were prepared to take the money and drift. They might spend the proceeds in riotous living, as some men will after a hard and lonely year. Later, perhaps, Barrows might start another herd; he might even settle down somewhere. But those were vague thoughts, for he was barely thirty, and there was a lot of helling in him yet.

But not so now. As he hit the foothills of the Hussars, in the waning light, on his

way to rejoin Old Amos and the herd high in the hills, he saw the woman riding ahead along a wooded ridge. He was a little drunk from the three long ones he had had at O'Sullivan's in celebration over having found a buyer, and at first he thought he was seeing a ghost. The woman rode a big horse, her hair flying wild above the short riding cape. Her face was pale, like a wax mask, and, when the low moon came from behind a cloud, her features took on a ghastly shine.

It was the way she was letting the horse run that got him; she looked neither right nor left. Madness seemed to be in that ride. Barrows let his reins go and dug in the spurs. She was heading off the wooded ridge toward a narrow traverse connecting two headlands. He got a little nervous, for he knew that traverse. It was at most two feet wide at the top with a hundred foot drop on either side. He had used it as a short-cut earlier in the day, and cautiously. It was five hundred yards long.

But the woman ahead was plunging toward it at reckless speed. He realized then that it was a run-away; she had lost mastery over the beast. Shaking out a fastloop, not thinking of what he was doing, he shot out on the traverse after her.

Her bay crossed the traverse at full gallop, and having reached the other side, where a sort of bench trail widened and wound upwards, Barrows saw to his amazement that she checked the horse and sat still in the saddle, her head drooping.

He was in the middle of the traverse, his pony traveling fast, when her bay wheeled and she saw him. Her mouth opened wide in terror. His horse stumbled once, recovered, and then was safe on the other side. Sheepishly he gathered up his rope as he trotted up toward her. He flicked sweat from his brow, "Ma'am," he said, "you must be plain loco to take that ridge in a gallop."

She swayed in the saddle as if about to fall. "You almost went over the edge," she stammered. "Are you out of your head?"

He shrugged. "What about you? What were you trying to do? Get killed?"

She was shaking, and as he caught her rein she slid from the saddle. He dismounted and tied the horses. In his saddle pocket was a bottle he was bringing Old Amos. "Have a drink of this and you'll feel better."

She took a drink and handed back the bottle; then she got up. "Thanks." She looked toward her horse. Barrows saw then she was beautiful; her face was a perfect, strong oval. In the moonlight her hair looked faintly golden. He took her by the shoulder, some queer annoyance in him. He said, "What were you doing? It's plain suicide riding that ridge at night."

She said tonelessly, "I've ridden it before." She shrugged and he saw her eyes were moist. "But since seeing someone else doing it I guess I never will again. I'm sorry."

He let out his breath. "I guess we all got troubles."

She looked up, and it was as if some strange knowledge passed between them. Only someone sick of life, a person at the end of some intolerable rope, would pull a trick like that.

The woman said suddenly, "What do you know about troubles? You're a man!"

"I know trouble when I see it."

"You're a stranger here. Please don't ever mention this."

"Well, don't ever ride here again."

They stood in silence for several minutes. Then she turned toward the horse once more while his whole being ached with the beauty and mystery of her. She shrugged once more. "What does it matter? Well, anyway, thanks. . . ."

The loneliness of her struck him then, the desperate smallness of her against this vast, rocky wilderness. A lone woman in the night, troubled and beautiful. The three drinks he had had at O'Sullivan's made him take a step forward, after her. In the

next moment he had grasped her by the arm and had swept her into his embrace. He found her mouth despite her struggle against him; but when she went rigid he released her slowly. It seemed she knew what had moved him to do this. Her quirt hung on her wrist, but she made no move to use it. "Forget you ever saw me," she said.

His hands reached for her almost without his knowing it. "That will be hard," he said.

"Please!"

He held the stirrup for her as she mounted. Seconds later she was gone from sight. . . .

LES BARROWS stood for a while staring up the trail where she had vanished. It seemed almost unreal that he had, a short time ago, had a woman in his arms. Then an impulse brought him to the saddle, and he mounted and followed her. He couldn't see her, but frequently, when he pulled his horse to a halt, he thought he could still hear the hoofbeats of her horse. Eventually, however, he had to admit he had lost her trail.

He had reached a clearing on a wooded bench where a main trail crossed his own and had no way of guessing which direction she had taken. He pulled up in the shadow of a tree and sat cursing softly while his horse got its wind. Fever was in his blood, and he hated the gradual soberness he felt coming on.

A light blinked at him through the night from the north end of the trail. A ranchhouse, probably. There was a ranch up there somewhere, he knew. Was she there? Should he ride up and knock on the door and inquire? Like a damn fool? He cursed again.

Slow hoofbeats came toward him from the direction of the light. He cursed again. Other hoofbeats came now from the south.

Shortly the rider from the north trail rode into the clearing. He was a tall heavy man sitting loosely in the saddle. As he pulled up Barrows thought that he had been seen, but the rider hailed the horseman from the south.

The latter called, "That you, Ray?"

Ray said, "I was looking for you."

"Yeah, I can guess what for." Then: "Nothing doing. Not a chance."

Ray squirmed in the saddle. "But you got to let me have some money!"

"You got the gamblin' itch again!" The other's voice was cynical. "You won't get a plugged nickel from me. Get your stake somewhere else. You should know where."

"All right," Ray said slowly. "You run your cattle through somewhere else too. Not through my place. I'm through. You can't trade on that deal any more."

"Don't make me laugh."

"You'll laugh when Avery and one of his posses catches you. You know somebody might just tip him off. . . ."

There was a short silence. Then the slim man on the black said, "What you been drinking, Ray? You know you'd never live to spill your guts." He spoke with conviction. "Why, hell, you're in hock-deep with me, and you know it. It's your place, and you've had your share of the profits and gambled them away, but I got your receipts. You'd make a pretty picture dangling from Dekker's corral gate."

Les Barrows expected gunsmoke but Ray only said. "Yeah, alongside of you, Oren."

Oren leaned forward in the saddle. "Quit blowing your mouth off. Now go on and get your damned gambling stake somewhere else." He added mockingly, "Why don't you try the bank?"

Barrows felt an indescribable dislike for both these men rise in him like gall. They were birds of a feather, each reeking of carrion. He wished they'd move on so that he could get on his own way. He was sorry he had listened.

Oren picked up his reins and prepared to ride past the other. "Ella home?" he asked casually.

Ray said dully, "How would I know where she is?"

Oren laughed. "Not even lucky at cards either, eh?" He rode on to the north trail, his back fully turned on the other. There was a moment when Barrows thought Ray would lift his gun and take an easy shot, but the man shrugged listlessly and sat staring after the other.

In another moment Barrows understood. Two riders came drifting out of the darkness south of the clearing, passed Ray leisurely, and followed Oren like a pair of mounted shadows. Eventually Ray struck out to the south.

AMOS had the three hundred-odd head of Hereford-Longhorn strain bedded down in the short box canyon when Barrows caught up with him. The old man was humming softly as he made circle, seeing that there was no critter in rock, bush, or bunch grass to set them off, even if the animals were tired of being drifted all day. As Barrows built a fire at one side of the canyon's mouth and set the coffeepot on three stones, the old man came up and slid noiselessly from the saddle. "A fire?" he said.

"Why not, Amos? This is the end of the trail. Harris decided to buy. Tomorrow. Looks like a sure thing."

"But we don't know where we are. I mean on whose range."

Barrows shrugged. "I want some coffee. I'm tired of drifting around like a damned owlhoot." He kept thinking of the woman. "The ground makes a hell of a bum bed after a while, Amos."

The oldster squinted. "You seem spooky tonight—an' you got the settle-down urge." He shook his head. "Won't work, Les. You're a natural born fiddlefoot. Just because you'll get your kick full of money tomorrow, you think that makes you a solid citizen. Hawks don't belong in cages, no more'n you an' me inside four walls."

Barrows flopped the bacon over in the pan. "I don't know, Amos. I don't know."

The old man decided to drop the subject. He sniffed at the coffee smell. "My old bones are aching," he said slowly. "I'm sure glad it looks like the end of *this* trail though."

It had been a tough and lonely year for both men, but especially for Barrows, camping out, staying close to the herd as they built it, at the same time drifting it along. Not much fun or liquor, no company but dreams. As he sat there, wide-shouldered and almost handsome, his lean face looking into the black night past the fire, with the subtle sounds and sensations of the nearness of the bedded herd behind him, all Lester Barrows' dreams seemed to focus on the woman. Also, strangely, he could not erase from his mind the feeling that the two men he had heard talking were connected with her. Could she be the Ella they'd mentioned? At last, after a final look at the herd, he rolled himself in his blankets and went to sleep. . . .

In the morning as the two men drifted the herd down the mountain slopes toward Overton and the shipping pens, Barrows glanced back north along the hills and saw a ranch layout on a vast bench surrounded by rising range and forest. A column of smoke rose from the house chimney. He drank in the sight and for a long while sat turned in the saddle. "See what I mean?" he said to Amos. "A man should have a place like that."

Amos was old, year-bitten and cynical. He had a fear of much money, thought nothing good ever came from it. The mossyhorn had a great suspicion of houses, fancy clothes, and steady jobs. Right now he was sitting in the only home he had ever known, with a big foot in each doorstep.

Two riders came up the slope, passing the herd. After a greeting, Barrows thumbed in the direction of the far ranch and asked a question.

The man shrugged. "That's the Tucker Flying T."

The other spat across the pommel and shifted his chew. He was a weatherbeaten, freckled, thick-set man. "Not much of an outfit," he said. "A great ranch, though. Was, anyhow."

"How do you mean?" said Barrows, and the man shrugged and made ready to ride on.

CHAPTER TWO

Maverick Trail Pilgrims

AT NOON Ben Harris, a middle-aged, stern-faced man who needed Barrows' herd for a shipment he had contracted for, said the beef looked good enough, and bought it at the price. Thus he brought Les' and Amos' hard year to a lucky finale.

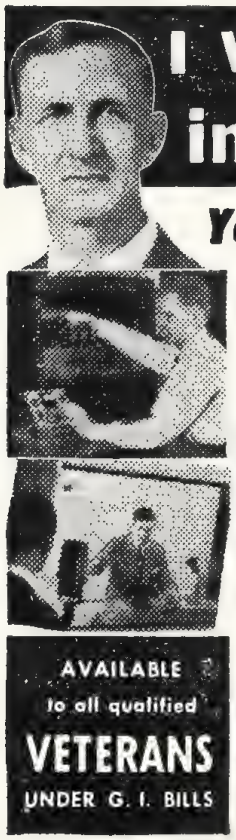
"How will you have it?" he asked Les when his men had hazed the cattle into the railroad pens.

"Cash, I guess. Just plain cash."

Harris looked at him sharply, then put his checkbook away. "I was going to give you a draft," he said, "but I guess you don't keep your money in an account." There was contempt and amusement in his tone. "Well, walk up to the bank with me, and I'll get the cash." It was obvious that he classified Barrows, with his sun-beaten face and two thigh-strung guns as a maverick cattleman and nothing else. The $6,500 would likely go for fast fun and a brief period of high and furious living.

Les felt this as they walked along, but he said nothing. Amos came behind them, trailing Les' horse with him. As they neared the bank, Barrows suddenly stopped outside Carringer's Hotel. He stared hard.

The woman sat in a buckboard outside the bank, a short distance away, holding a team of bays in check. A tall man was standing in the dust, his hands resting on



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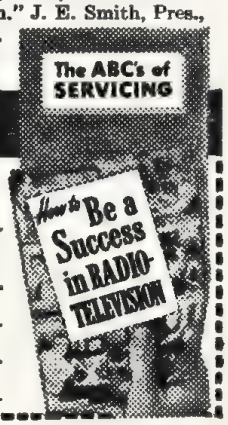

the seat guard as he talked with her. They seemed to be arguing and also trying to keep their voices in check. But Les knew the man's voice.

It was one of the men of the night before. Barrows had seen him a few times during the week he had been in and out of Overton looking for a buyer. It was Raymond Tucker, gambler and wastrel, with a reputation for cheating at cards. Violent resentment rose in Barrows at seeing him talking to the woman. His right hand balled into a fist.

In daylight she looked more desirable and unattainable than ever. She happened to glance his way, and he thought he had never seen such troubled, yet haughty blue eyes. She refused recognition. Yet it was again as if they knew each other, and a terrible want shook him. It was as it had been on the night he'd met her.

Ben Harris had stopped a few steps ahead and was looking back with some impatience. "Well?"

"I'll wait here," Barrows said with a wave of the hand, and Harris entered the bank.

It was obviously not a pleasant talk between the man and the woman. Once Tucker grasped the woman's wrist and wrenched it. Barrows saw her redden; she was holding the team with her left hand and trying to free her right in which she held the whip. Barrows was off the boardwalk when she saw him move. With an effort she tore her arm free, swung the team into the roadway. Without looking back she picked up the team on the reins and trotted them off in a cloud of dust. She sat straight in the seat, her figure holding Barrows' attention till she was out of sight.

Anger moved Barrows' legs mechanically toward Tucker. He said savagely, "You have a hell of a manner with a woman, mister!"

Tucker looked up in quick surprise. He was handsome in a weak way; yet there was a crafty look in her eyes. "That's neither here nor there in this man's town," he said. "In fact it's none of your damn business!"

Old Amos, sitting his horse behind Barrows ,cleared his throat loudly. The moment passed with Tucker shrugging, with Ben Harris stepping out of the bank and saying, "Well, there's the money, Barrows."

BARROWS turned then and came over to Harris, who began counting a heavy sheaf of notes into his hand. He stood there taking the first big money he had ever owned for the first herd that had ever been his as if it was a casual act which happened each day in his life. He could not get the sight of Tucker's knuckled hand about the woman's wrist out of his mind.

"Sixty-five hundred and twenty," Harris said eventually, and Barrows said, "Thanks, I guess that's it," and made a roll and stuck the money in his pocket. Barrows said then, "That Tucker there own the Flying T?"

Harris nodded, contempt in his voice. "What's left of it. It's a wonder the man hasn't gambled it away yet. But it may come to that, too." He shook hands with Barrows then. "Luck to you," he said, and left.

Turning to face Amos, who was sliding out of the saddle and hitching the horses at the hotel rail, Barrows saw Tucker had not moved, that he had stood there, watching the transaction. His eyes were bulging a little. The reflection of the money he had just seen was still in his eyes before he veiled them. Then he made a bland face, mounted the boardwalk, and shouldered through the swing door into the bar.

Amos said, "That hombre sure liked the look of your dinero, all right."

"He should," Barrows said. "He's one of the jaspers I told you about last night."

They were standing in the hotel bar a while later, over drinks, and Amos was

studying his friend. "Still spooky and restless, ain't yeh? Even more so. . . ." When Barrows said nothing the old man went on, "You still got that hill ranch on your mind—and that girl in the buckboard. I saw you. You looked like you'd seen her before, like you knowed each other." He shook his head. "I told you no good would come of making that much money. It puts ideas into your head. She looks like trouble to me. Me, I'll take the kind you can pay cash for and have done with."

Barrows talked as if in a trance. "Amos, I want a ranch like that—and a woman like that." He meant, I want her and no other.

Amos shook his head again. "You got it bad. Ride on, cowboy. This place is too damn' respectable. Let's go down the other end of the street and git stinkin' drunk and git some noisy women in a joint where we can keep our hats on."

Reluctantly, Barrows followed him out. All next day he drifted about town, looking for the woman. He was too proud to ask anyone who she was. She did not come to town. He wondered what connection Tucker had with her; he pondered over the Flying T and the man called Oren. All these things added up to something, he did not know what.

He saw Tucker, who always eyed him with interest, in bars here and there sitting in desultory games with strangers, newcomers to town. Usually the newcomers would get fleeced by a team consisting of Tucker, a puffy, white-haired man called Judge Dickson and a hawk-faced man named Harmon. Most often they sat in a corner of the hotel bar late in the afternoon when the place was nearly deserted.

At noon the second day Amos woke up with a hangover and went out on the hotel porch to find Barrows looking toward the mountains. "For god's sake, let's saddle and ride, Les," the old man said. "This town life is killing me. Let's drift."

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Barrows said slowly, "Not yet, Amos. Not yet. Have a hunch I'll set in a little game first . . ."

"You mean with them three?"

"Maybe." Somehow he had to get to know Tucker, even if it galled him, to learn the mystery of the woman. Instinct told him so.

Amos said, "Good, good. Get skinned out of that damned money, and you'll have to drift. We'll get back on the maverick trail where we belong."

TUCKER smiled a little when Les drifted to the three men's table. Tucker introduced himself and his companions. There was a stack of chips in front of the judge, a smaller one by Harmon, who shifted the cigar in his mouth and did a one-hand shuffle.

"Clanton, the head bartender, is not here," said the judge blandly. "I'll sell you some of mine. How much?"

So they were dry? Someone cleaned them out! Barrows hesitated a moment and pulled the roll from his pocket while they waited behind wooden faces to see if he'd fall for their crude pitch. "I'll take a thousand dollars worth," he said.

The judge dealt him his chips and pocketed the money. Harmon cut to deal, and Tucker had the audacity to borrow five hundred of Barrows' money from the judge, claiming he had left his own wallet at the ranch.

They let Barrows win now and again, were completely fooled by his air of innocence. His losses mounted. A few people came and went in the bar, murmured over their drinks, giving Barrows a sense of knowing that he was being fleeced. He kept a mild expression and continued to buy chips from the judge as his money ran out. He kept watching Tucker.

Eventually his calmness began getting on the others' nerves. The thing seemed a little too easy. After two hours Tucker threw down his hand, reached for his chips. He said, "Guess I'll sit the rest of the game out."

Barrows said, "Why give up now? I only have fifty left."

Tucker caught the sting. "No use being bitter. Nobody forced you. You were after our money. We were after yours."

"Maybe you got a point there. Still, you have seen *my* money. I don't recall seeing yours," Barrows grinned across the table at Tucker.

Tucker said thinly, "Meaning what?"

"That you been playing with *my* money and nothing else. Bartender!"

Tucker said, "Be careful!"

Barrows, keeping Tucker's gaze, called for the bartender again, and at last the man answered him from the far end of the bar.

"Cash these gentlemen's chips."

There was silence. When Barrows repeated the order, the man at last said, "Sorry, I can't do that."

At that moment Tucker decided to chance it for his gun, then dropped the idea. Old Amos' voice cut through from the street door: "They tell me ye're settin' in a funny kind of card game, Les. How ye doin'?"

Tucker's hand relaxed. Barrows said, "I ain't through playin' yet, Amos." He turned to Judge Dickson. "You sold me a thousand dollars worth of chips when we started. Where's your own thousand beyond the money you took off me in the game? You didn't buy chips from the bar."

Tucker said, "You got no beef coming, too late to play the bum loser."

"I'm not beefing about losing, but I'm entitled to see the cash you gents had when you sold me chips. Fair enough?"

There was a small crowd now. Tucker looked like a rat in a trap. He didn't like the murmurs of "Fair enough," that echoed Barrows'.

"Fair hell!" he said. "You lost, so you lost." He made a move to get up. "Let's get out of here!"

Barrows was white about the lips. "Let me see your cash. Trot it out!"

The three men hesitated. A man at the back of the spectator group said, "Looks to me like he got you there, Ray. The man has a squawk right enough."

Without looking Barrows knew the voice; it belonged to the second man of two nights ago, the one on the black horse who had asked for "Ella" and had laughed after refusing Tucker money.

Tucker was sweating now, and Barrows said again, "Show me your cash." The crowd began murmuring, "Tucker got showed up for once . . . about time . . . we were waiting for this. . . ."

The humiliation was too much for the man. Hectic red spots came and went on his cheeks. "Clanton," he called in a cracked voice to the bartender, "let me see pen and paper." He looked sharply at Barrows, "I'll show you some collateral against your chicken feed."

THE requirements were brought, and Tucker hastily wrote out a simple deed to the Flying T. "Witness it," he told the judge and Harmon, and when they hesitated he pressed them, "Sign it! Sign it! I'll show up that two-bit trail driver!"

After that he sat savagely riffling the cards. "Does that look like money or not?" he snapped at Barrows.

"I still have a few dollars left," Barrows said evenly. "You had a fair chance at my money. Now do I get a fair chance at yours? Let's say a little two-man game to make it fast? I shuffle, you cut; you shuffle, I cut. Game?"

The challenge hung in the air. "Ray," said Oren, from the ring of spectators, "you can't hardly refuse him."

Tucker looked up and went pale. Barrows got a look at Oren now, a lanky man with a handsome red face. His hard slate-colored eyes spoke of authority. He winked cynically at Barrows.

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At last Tucker spoke. "Done," he said flatly, and someone broke out a new deck. "I'll stand the drinks," said the red-faced man as men crowded into chairs, the better to see the game.

Barrows slapped the cards down in a fast insert shuffle, repeated, and shoved the deck at Tucker.

"Les," Amos said from behind him. "You run out of money, I still got eighty cartwheels in my jeans."

Tucker's hand shot out and turned up a deuce. Gasps came from the judge and Harmon. Tucker shuffled rapidly and set the deck down.

Barrows cut a three of hearts. Without emotion he said to Tucker, "You owe me fifty, and I'll take no chips this time. Cash."

For a second it looked as if Tucker would explode into action; then he slid fifty dollars across. He was sweating.

"A hundred bid," said Les, and shuffled.

Tucker cut a king and shuffled hard. There was a gasp from the crowd when Barrows, sweating a little himself now, lifted his cut to show an ace. "Four hundred bid," he said.

Tucker shoved the two hundred out to make Barrows' four. "Maybe you better quit," he said. "Luck like that doesn't last."

But Barrows shuffled hard. "Your cut, Tucker."

Tucker turned up the ace of clubs. All eyes were now on Barrows.

"Why bother cutting?" someone said.

The red-faced man whistled. Barrows had turned up the joker. No muscle moved in his face. "Sorry, Tucker," he said. "Poker deck." He reached for the money. "Eight hundred bid; your cut."

An oath sailed from Tucker's lips as Barrows shuffled again. "You're either a miracle man or a crook."

"Take your choice," said Barrows evenly, "better pull your gun when you pick that last name."

"Set up the drinks again," the red-faced man said.

"Les," Amos called as Tucker was about to cut again. "Hold back some of your money. Why shove that eight hundred at him? Hold back some or you'll damn well be sorry."

"And break a streak of luck like this? Hell no! Eight hundred bid. Let's get to it!"

"I'll take your damned money if you haven't had enough." Tucker quickly cut a nine.

Barrows cut a ten. He lit a smoke, tossed off the drink that the bartender shoved at him, and shuffled rapidly again. "Sixteen hundred bid!"

Ten minutes later, sixty-four hundred and twenty dollars were lying in front of him. Tucker had taken his coat off, his shirt was open, and his eyes were wild. He kept doing the double insert shuffle as if he wanted to tear the cards apart. At last he slammed the deck down hard. "All right, you got your money back. Are you satisfied?"

Barrows seemed unruffled. "No, let's keep on." He nodded toward Tucker's ranch deed lying on the table. "Your collateral against my money—unless you can scrape up some cash. You had plenty of chance at *my* money; now I'm back where I started. I want a chance at yours." He hesitated and ran his glance over the three men who had played against him. Then: "Maybe you gentlemen have got enough cash between you to make up a fair-sized bet for Mister Tucker." He shoved his pile of money out on the table. "Sixty-four hundred bid."

"That sum against a ranch is unequal," Tucker almost whispered. His face was as white as a sheet.

"Get some cash then!"

Tucker looked at his companions. They looked blank. Suddenly Tucker, caught, pushed the deed to the Flying T out to touch Barrows' money. His hands were

shaking so he could hardly hold the cards. "I'll take the *last* cut," he said. "Make your draw!"

CHAPTER THREE

Black Jack Ranch

SILENTLY he placed the deck in front of Barrows. Barrows laid his fingers over the cards and made his cut. A man swore softly.

"Black Jack."

The jack of spades. Barrows shffled the pasteboards again.

"You went and done it that time, Les," croaked Amos. "Well, we'll drink up that last hundred and start scraping up another herd. Anyhow this fun was worth havin'."

"Quiet," the red-faced man said. "Never was a black jack so black it didn't beat something."

With an almost careless gesture Tucker swept his cut off the deck, turned it, then smashed it down in a shower of cards, cascading over table and chairs. He was on his feet in the instant, his gun drawn. The card had been the three of spades.

"Crook! Thief! Cheat!"

Barrows fired then, from his hip, the bullet cutting across the cylinder of Tucker's gun, spinning the weapon to the floor.

As Tucker leaned on the table with his good hand, Barrows looked up at him through the drifting powersmoke. "You seem to be full of damn fool plays," he said icily. "Your hand can still hold a pen. Fill in my name and sign that paper. Next time you pull on me I'll kill you."

"Got you dead to rights, Ray," said the red-faced man. "You did it that time." There was a vindictiveness in the tone that chilled even Barrows.

Tucker looked from the red-faced man to Barrows, and suddenly wilted; he slumped into the chair, rubbed a hand

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over a livid face and grabbed the pen. Blood smeared on the deed as he filled in the name of Barrows and affixed his signature to the transfer.

Barrows took the paper. He said evenly, "Well, at least *I* win a pot for once."

Tucker got to his feet, looked at the red-faced man, who was studying him tensely, "And now see where that leaves *you*. Yeah, see where it leaves you." He swung toward the bar and called loudly for a bottle. They saw him fill a tumbler, down its contents at a gulp before he crashed through the door to the street.

Old Amos sighed, poured a drink and set the bottle down gingerly. "What luck, Les. Black Jack Ranch. What you gonna do with it?"

Barrows inserted a shell in his gun, took a drink, and said between his teeth. "Run it. Raise stock and make money. Live on it."

The red-faced man rocked back in his chair. His coat-skirts slipped aside to reveal two ivory-handled pistols. There was a gleam in his eyes as he said, "It's quite a place, hombre, quite a place." He chuckled then with an insolence that irritated Barrows. "I'm glad to see a *man* finally get his claws on it."

Something made Barrows say, "Thanks for the drinks. I didn't catch the name."

The several people who had patted Barrows on the back and congratulated him speciously on winning the Flying T had drifted away. Only the three men were left at the table. The man extended his hand, "Name's Brant. We might do some business sometime, never can tell."

The hand was cold and hard; like the eyes it had no warmth. "We might," Barrows said blandly.

After recording the deed Barrows and Amos had dinner; then they walked into Carringer's Hotel. The word had gone around that Barrows was the man who had won the Flying T in a game of cut-and-draw. Curious eyes watched the two men, but there were no friendly greetings.

"Should have got rooms down to O'Sullivan's," Amos remarked. "Damn sight more friendly there."

"Forget it," Barrows said stubbornly. He was wondering when he would see the girl again.

In their room Barrows kicked a chair under the doorknob and hung his gun belt over the bed frame. Looking at the clean sheets he began stripping down to the skin. "I'm gonna enjoy this. No more hard ground for me. I'm a rancher now."

Amos, fully dressed, his hands crossed behind his head, was already in bed. Only his boots were off. "Don't count your calves till the bull's been after your cows," he said.

THEY were on their way to Flying T the next day when a group of horsemen began overhauling them on the trail. Soon Brant and a retinue of four men were riding alongside. There was something dangerous and commanding about Brant, a sullen, prodding a gleam in his eye. The four men rode in a row, their rifle butts sticking high above their pommels. They didn't look as though they spent much time nursing cattle.

Brant called, "A nice morning," and kept stirrup to stirrup.

"Nice enough, Barrows said.

Brant laughed. "You're quite an hombre, Barrows, quite an hombre." He said that in the tone he had said that the Flying T was quite a ranch. "You're handy with cards, handy with a gun."

Though he kept laughing, there seemed no amusement in him; underneath lurked a glint of steely resentment even as he praised Barrows. Barrows made his voice soft, "The cards was luck," he said evenly, "the gun was justified. . . ." He noticed suddenly that Amos had dropped behind the four riders to pry a stone from his horse's hoof. When he remounted he kept riding behind.

"Sure, sure," Brant said. "Well, what I have on my mind is more or less a little business. Tell you what: my eyes were always on that Flying T: You got it sight unseen. I'll tell you: I'll double your money and you hand me that deed with a transfer on it."

Barrows said after a moment, "If you wanted it that bad why didn't you buy it —or win it?"

The other's face darkened, "That's neither here nor there. I made you a good offer."

"Thanks, I'm not taking it up."

"Maybe you should—maybe there's more'n just Ray Tucker involved in that property."

"Meaning what?"

"I guess you'll have to see for yourself."

Brant leaned out of the saddle and tapped him on the knee with a gloved hand. There was an odd, almost furious undercurrent in his voice, like that of a man who wants something badly and will let nothing stand in his way. "The offer still stands for the moment. It's a damned good one, Barrows. Think! You're buying the cat in the bag maybe. You've never looked over the T. Reckon some day you'll wish you'd taken that offer."

Barrows' hand drummed idly on his saddle horn. "I guess that's the chance I'll have to take. Good day, Mr. Brant." And he picked up his mount's speed.

"I'll see you," Brant said, and fell back. . . .

As Amos came up alongside Barrows he said, "You should have taken that offer with both hands. A cat in the bag, all right. Brant is running his stolen beef business through that ranch, and he's got some holt on Tucker. Keep out of it. What more do you want than your money doubled?"

"The ranch," said Barrows, "and whatever goes with it."

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Amos said, "is that Brant is rustling a big piece of stolen beef through it right now, or holding some ready to run it across the border. That's why he's so itchy to get his hands on the place. I reckon he figured that after you won the place from Tucker you'd only be too glad to sell it to him." He spat across the pommel. "Don't fool too much with that hombre, Les. He's dynamite."

Les shrugged. "Maybe I'm dynamite too. Who can tell?"

"That Sheriff Avery back in Overton," Amos continued after a while, "the way I heard the talk runnin', has been given the wildgoose chase pretty often by Brant without knowing that Brant was behind all this stealing or where it was going. One of these days maybe somebody might tip him off."

"Something like that," Les said dryly.

THEY pulled up before the Flying T main house an hour later. It was a good-looking 'dobe-and-stucco affair, the main floor six feet off the ground, a long cedar gallery running its full length. The corrals stood up well, as did the bunkhouse and barns. There was little life abroad. Back of the place lay the Hussar Mountains, dark against the clean sky, offset with scattered stretches of timber above the benchlands. It was the kind of place that men dream about.

"This is mine now," Barrows said, sliding slowly from the saddle at the house rail.

Amos spat in the dust. He made no move to climb out of leather. "They say possession is nine points of the law. I'll wait here."

Barrows mounted the gallery steps and rapped against the square-paneled oaken front door. There was no answer for a full minute; and it was in him to grasp the door handle and fling open the gate to his own house. Something made him wait and knock again.

When steps sounded inside and the door opened he inadvertently removed his hat. But somehow his surprise was not as great as it might have been.

"Yes?"

He calculated she must be at least twenty-eight, a woman in full bloom. Her eyes were blue, with little hard slate flecks in them; the lips were strong. Her back was straight. Again, as their eyes met, a knowledge passed between them.

"I guess I've come to look over my property," he said easily, "if it's convenient."

"*Your* property?"

Sensing authority in her manner, though he did not yet understand her presence here, he pulled the recorded deed from his pocket. He forgot her earlier haughtiness in the quick pain it gave him to see her pride wilt for a moment as she read the document. She fumbled for the doorjamb to support herself.

"So he has done *that* now," she said at last. Then she straightened and looked him full in the eye.

"Ma'am?"

"This ranch is half mine."

"I don't savvy." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "How come that?"

She spoke coldly then, reserve covering a thin-worn pride: "I'm Mrs. Ray Tucker."

She could as well have slapped him across the face. She saw his opinion of her husband in his eyes and winced; she saw also his surprise and pity. She looked away past him into the distance. "How did you come to get possession of deed to the Flying T?" she asked softly.

"Your husband tried to rook me out of my cattle money in a stacked card game," he said evenly. "He and his friend rigged a game against me, playing with my own money. . . ." He shrugged, studying the close and yet so remote beauty of her face. Disappointment and sorrow hit him. ". . . . Well, I gave them enough rope. In the end they lost."

Contempt was in her voice and eyes, contempt for both him and her husband. "And you take a ranch for a gambling debt like that?"

Since she was beyond reach now, being Tucker's wife, anger and resentment stirred him to say, "It was not *my* game. I played clean." He patted the paper. He felt like saying, "Why in hell did a woman like you marry a stinker like Tucker, a damned no-good?" But control stayed the words. He wished at this moment that she had belonged to any man but Tucker. He could not see her in Tucker's arms; the thought blinded him with rage. He wished now he had never seen her.

"The house furnishings are mine; some of the stock is mine, a good deal of my money was put into this place."

He did not doubt her word. He saw the picture clearly of her marrying a handsome no-good, who got into debt, who gambled and drank and became a cheat, and knew how she tried to keep his place going despite him. Yet he heard himself say, "Yet you're not mentioned in the land book, or in any previous deed or lien recorded."

She stood straight and firm in the middle of the door; she was not giving up her castle to strangers with a piece of paper. "You'll have to take my word," she said proudly.

He bowed. "Your word is good enough for me."

Unnoticed by them, Old Amos had slid from the saddle and was now at Les' elbow. His greasy sombrero came off to show his wrinkled, thin-haired pate. "I told you to tear up that there paper, Les," he drawled. "No good will come from a deal like that. Hear me, man; listen to sense." He addressed Mrs. Tucker. "Don't mind my partner too much, ma'am; he ain't a bad sort of hombre, only he thinks he wants to settle down and be respectable. He don't, he's a fiddlefoot at heart and won't admit it. Come on, Les."

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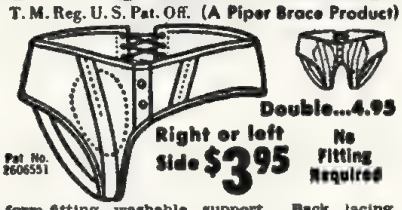

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MRS. TUCKER looked at the old man, and something that could have been a smile showed in her eyes. She spoke to Les again, "I'm not denying that you have some claim."

"Come on," Amos said again. "Don't you know a lady when you see one? Ride on out of here. Ain't you got no bringing up?"

Barrows put on his hat and turned toward his horse. "I won't bother you in the house," he said grimly. "You're welcome to stay as long as you want. Maybe we can settle your claims. I can live in the bunkhouse. But I want the ranch I risked my money for. I want the running of it." He added more softly, "I'd like to say that if it wasn't for your husband cheating me and trying to kill me I'd just as soon drop the whole matter. But I don't take that from any man. I'm sorry."

As he turned and went down the steps the door closed with a click.

Barrows stood looking thoughtfully at the house. He felt suddenly like an old and beaten man. The money in his pocket was like so many dead stones; the deed like an unimportant rag. Something blocked the sun. "Tear loose and ride on," something in him said. "Forget this thing." But still he stood, rooted to the spot, staring at the door that had closed in his face.

Amos, watching him intently, said softly, "Do yeh learn now, man? Nothin' good 'ud ever come of it. Yeh stayin' here eatin' out yer good heart over something that is another man's." He lifted the reins softly and gestured, "Arrh, let's ride. Let's get out of here Les." He almost whispered the last words.

Lester Barrows could not grasp it. He had known many women, possessed some, loved some, too, in his way. This one he had only seen three times, spoken with twice, and yet the poison or whatever it was in his blood was there to stay. He would always want her, her and a ranch like this. He would never forget her. It happens only once in a lifetime, and not to all men.

But nevertheless he prepared to mount. Amos was right. There was only one way out.

Amos' eyes lit up as he saw the decision in Les' face. Then Barrows' hand dropped from the saddle and he began leading his horse across the wide yard toward the bunkhouse. "No, Amos. Not yet, not yet." And he heard Amos sigh behind him as he prepared to follow.

In the bunkhouse four men were rolling tarps and packing belongings as the two friends entered. They constituted the Flying T crew. They looked up sharply at Barrows and Amos, but said nothing.

"Leaving?" Barrows said testily.

A tall brown-haired fellow nodded "Yep. Ray Tucker pulled the last straw last night. We're fadin'. We been goin' to fade for a long time."

Barrows considered the men sharply. "Name's Lester Barrows, this is my segundo Amos Gunner. Stay on and I'll jack your wages up some. I'm gonna need a crew."

The men looked at one another. The brown-haired man said, "We ain't ridin' for no ranch-gambler, mister."

"You been ridin' for one all along."

One of the men said, "Ain't no use We stuck on the job because of her—" He gestured toward the house. "With her leavin' we'll be drifting somewhere else too. Let's get on packing."

"Stay on a while. Maybe she ain't leaving."

The brown-haired man said sharply, "How be that?"

"The house is hers, and the things in it. She has some claims. Some of her money was invested in the place."

One of the riders said, "God knows she had—and a hell of a lot of patience too."

Barrows went on, "For the present anyhow I can live in the bunkhouse here. I want to work this ranch."

"You got a job on your hands, mister."

"Meaning," Les said slowly, "Brant?"

The tall man glanced at the others in ill-hidden surprise. "A wise owl, eh? How do you know about Brant?"

"Fell onto it by accident. What's the set-up?"

The fellow seemed to be warming up to Barrows. "Brant used to be county judge, still has a powerful say-so in Overton Valley. He caught Tucker cheating him in cards once and almost killed him. Tucker didn't know whom he was up against. Brant spared him and started using him, using the Flying T to shuttle his stolen beef through. The place is just built for it, close to the state border too. Tucker's a gamblin' fool, but can't win. Brant's been lending him money and gettin' him deeper and deeper in hock. He gambled away the missus' money too." He hesitated. "They been usin' the missus to give the place a clean front. She don't know much about what goes on. She has friends among the best people in town; the Walkers, Harrises, and people like that."

Barrows nodded. "And you kept your mouths shut to save her face. Quite an outfit; quite an outfit. How much stock on it?"

"About 'tween two, three thousand head. Some of it brush scrub . . . if you round it all up."

Lester Barrows rubbed his chin. "Want to stay on a while; I want to see what goes. I'll give you some advance pay, or maybe it's back pay, right now?"

"Like I said, whoever takes this place over tackles a job. Brant's got an army of hell-ridin' wildcats workin' for him. They stay in the woods and across the border. The town never sees them."

Barrows said again, "Want to stay on a while?" And the men went to a corner and got into a huddle. After a spell they came back. The brown-haired rider held out his hand. "Guess we'll chance it for a

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CHAPTER FOUR

Undercover Warrior

WHEN Barrows and Amos were alone they went to the far corner of the bunkhouse and lay their bedrolls on bunks. "What you aim to do now?" the oldster asked. "You dealt yourself into some game, all right. I'm payin' ten to one neither Tucker nor Brant is goin' to sit back an' let you take over this place. You won't be worth two-bits here, Les. You done gone and bought yourself a bullet in the back, and that's whatever."

Barrows flicked his guns from the holsters. "Maybe not and mebbe so," he said spinning them on his forefingers and putting them back. "I got twelve here that speak for *me.*"

"In the dark? And with an army of owl-hoots pottin' at you?"

"Scared, Amos?"

The oldster cackled. "An old dog like me? Never breathe the word, Les. I got a hogleg too that ain't just a ornament. But what you aim to do first?"

"I got some thinking to do, Amos."

"Ye *have,*" said Amos with emphasis.

From the bunkhouse Barrows stared across at the main house, his chin in his hand. "I'm going over to the house for a while," he told Amos presently.

This time no one answered his knock on the door. He walked to the back, but got no answer from the kitchen either, though the door was ajar. Venturing into the kitchen he called cautiously. "Mrs. Tucker! I'd like to speak with you, please."

Still there was no answer. He entered a large square hall facing the front of the house. He was about to call again when he happened to look up the wide stairway leading to the second floor. Reflected in a tall leaning mirror just inside a bedroom door he saw the woman crumpled on a large bed, her head buried in her hands. About her were indications of hurried packing.

His impulse was to mount the stairs and hand her the deed, or tear it up—whatever she wished. He was sorry now that he had ever sat in that damned game. Emotions tore through him, but he was stymied by his lack of experience with crying women. His foot was on the first step when the clatter of horses hoofs filled the yard. A glance through the window beside the door showed him Brant and his riders. Brant was dismounting at the rail and coming up the steps while the others waited.

Instinct drew Barrows into the kitchen. Meaning to leave the house, he found himself blocked by the presence of the riders in the yard.

Brant knocked twice, then threw the door open, and entered. Entered, Les noticed, as if he owned the place. "Ella," he called. "Ella!" His voice filled the house.

A moment later Ella Tucker came down the stairs, pale, somewhat collected. She drew herself up a bit and faced Brant. "What is it, Oren?"

He gave her a long glance. "I guess you know by now what Ray did with the ranch. Yes he finally went and did it."

She nodded. "Mr. Barrows was here . . . ." She shrugged. "His claim seems to be legal enough. I'm moving on."

"Wait," he said. "Now, Ella, there's no need for that. Nothing so drastic. After all, you've got friends."

Insinuation was in the voice. Mrs. Tucker did not answer. She looked away, and Brant stepped toward her. "You should have listened to me long ago," he said. "I told you it would end like this. That he'd lose your house and home."

She made a hopeless gesture, and he went on, "But you won't lose this place. There's no need to worry about it."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "This man has a deed to the ranch. He got it in a card game, but he got it just the same. I know Ray and his games well enough—and none of my claims to the Flying T are on paper."

"Ella," Brant said, taking her hand, "you're evading the issue. You're through with Ray, aren't you? You've finally had enough?"

"I've had enough for a long time."

HIS VOICE grew a little hoarse and insistent. "You know how I feel about you, Ella! For god's sake, woman, have some brains! Don't keep a man on picket *too* long. Don't strain his patience! There's nothing I'd not do for you, Ell, you know that."

"Oren," she said. "Wait—"

"I'll give you time," he said. "I won't rush you. But as for the ranch, I know your heart is in it. Well, don't worry about this fellow Barrows." He gestured. "I'll get the ranch for you in *your* name. I'll make you a present of it."

"But how can you ignore Barrows?"

"He's only one man. He can be managed. Who's *he?* A stranger nobody knows. I never could get the ranch from Ray's hands, but I think this Barrows can be managed. Things like that have been fixed before."

She backed away a little. "You mean, he can be—killed. Oren, I want no part of that. I wouldn't want the Flying T on conditions like that!"

"Wait. Wait!" Brant laughed. "You misjudge me—you're a little ahead of me. I didn't say anything about killing. If Barrows won't sell maybe there's ways of getting that deed and transfer. After all, I still have some legal connections."

"Oren," she said, "you've been a friend in many ways, and I don't want to seem ungrateful. But I'm not blind. No, I'm not blind, Oren."

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"Don't believe everything you hear," he said. He stepped close again and took both her hands. "You told me once you thought you could learn to like me, to care for me. Ella, don't keep a man waiting forever. I want you more than anything else."

"I was lonesome and unhappy," she said slowly. "You're taking advantage of me—"

Suddenly he had her in his arms. "Listen, Ella, I want you more than anything else! I've got big plans for you and me—big plans. There's nothing I can't give you. Ella . . ."

He forced a kiss on her, and Barrows was about to interfere when she managed to free herself.

"You forget I'm Ray's wife!"

"Yes!" he said savagely. "Yes, but that can be fixed too!" He strode up and down and smacked his fist into his palm.

"You're mad, Oren."

"Yes—about you, Ella. You wait! Don't move off this place. It'll be yours in your name. Don't worry. I'll get it back for you if it's the last thing I do." He added, almost to himself as he strode toward the kitchen door behind which Barrows stood. "In fact I have to get it back. I *have* to." He walked toward the front door then and laid hand on the knob. "Do as I tell you then, Ella. Don't do anything hasty, like packing out of here. Sit tight and don't worry about Barrows."

In another moment he was gone.

BARROWS was undecided about what to do. He expected Ella Tucker to go back upstairs. She had stopped in front of the hall mirror and buried her face in her hands. "I must leave," she said aloud. "I must get out of here, ranch or no ranch. There's no other way." She straightened up and smoothed her hair. As Barrows was about to sneak out through the kitchen she came straight into the room.

She gasped, and her face got whiter. "What are you doing here?"

"I came over to settle your claims, or talk them over," he said. "Nobody answered the front door—and then Brant rode up."

She sank down on a chair, shaking her head. "And you heard everything?" He said nothing. Silence ran on for almost a minute. Then: "What is the way out of this for me? I see no other choice than to leave."

He spoke slowly, weighing each word. "No matter how you look at it, I won the Flying T in a card game. Your claims are surely better than mine. Well, I could give the ranch back to you, but maybe that wouldn't settle anything. You'd still have to—"

Color shot into her pale face. "I know. A worthless husband who thinks more of trouble and gambling than of his wife and home."

"And you'd have Brant," he said, "and all that goes with him."

She spread her hands in a desperate gesture. "What then, but my getting out of here?"

He saw ink and pen on a shelf and took the deed from his pocket. "I sat in a game over this ranch," he said as he wrote on the bottom of the deed. "I guess the game ain't played out just yet. This thing is willed to you, in case anything should happen to me." He signed the short will he had written and handed her the paper. Then he moved toward the door.

She followed him. "But where are you going? What are you about to do? I don't know that I can accept this. . . ."

He looked at her, remembering how she had felt in his arms. "You stay here! Don't give up the place." He gave a little sigh. "It looks like it could be a grand place . . . the kind I always wanted."

She put a hand on his arm, hardly knowing she touched him. "But why are you doing all this? Why are you mixing into this trouble? You haven't a chance against Brant! He's ruthless, he stops at

nothing. I—I wish you . . . you wouldn't."

He looked down at her. "When I sit in a game I generally see it through till it's played out and everybody pays or is paid off."

She said with break in her voice, "You're a strange man," but her tone showed that "strange" was not the word she meant.

He wanted to say, "I always dreamed of a woman like you," but all he could find was, "Maybe it's because, despite what Amos says, I know a lady when I see one." And he put on his hat and left.

AS HE rounded the house from the rear and came into the yard, circling the pump, he saw Amos sitting in the bunkhouse doorway, stuffing his pipe. Slim and Ed were tallowing a rope at the cavvy corral nearby. Sam was graining the horses. The clang of pots and skillets from the cook shack at the end of a bunkhouse indicated that Coe was rustling up the noon meal.

Except that Henderson and the four riders were still at the house rail and that Oren Brant was interrogating Amos from horseback, the picture would have been normal.

Brant saw Barrows and wheeled his horse to trot across the yard. He pulled up in the middle and sat looking down at the man on the ground with a curious irritation, as if he was worried about where Barrows had suddenly come from.

"Yes," Barrows said flatly. "You were looking for me?"

"About that offer," Brant said. "I've been thinking. I'll give you sixty-five hundred, nothing more. No double for that deed. And the offer won't stand. I'll give you till six o'clock tonight, and you better take it, mister!" His eyes bored into Barrows'. "I'm being pretty damn generous at that. I don't figure you cut too much ice around here. I'm not loaded down too hard with patience."

"Neither am I," Barrows said sharply.

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"You're talking to me in my own yard here. And right here, *I* cut the ice." His voice got thin. "It's no deal. I'm not selling. Not to you, and that's whatever. That clear?"

"It's clear that you're a damned fool!" Brant snapped. "I gave you your chance. Remember that." Brant was puzzled at Barrows' quick anger, and he looked uneasily toward the house as if wondering again if Barrows had been in there.

"Another thing," Barrows went on. "You're not running any more beef through the Flying T. Not a single head of your stolen stuff goes through. Is *that* clear?"

It seemed that the other man would almost roll from the saddle. His right hand tensed over his gun. Then he considered Barrows, standing, feet apart, hands hovering over two Colts. "Who told you about the beef?" he almost wheezed, his glance raking the three men at the bunkhouse.

"Not them," Barrows said.

"Who told you?" Brant did not seem worried, only curious.

Barrows considered his next words with all their implication; there was a shade of a smile about his mouth. "Now, who do you think?"

Brant laughed then as if the whole thing was a joke. He leaned forward in the saddle. "I gave you a piece of advice this morning. You didn't take it. Now I gave you a second, and you didn't take that. This ain't advice now. It's an order: pack up and get out of here and count yourself lucky you've got a whole hide, and money in your pocket. And *that's* whatever." He laughed again. "Why, hell, man, if you're seen in this valley after sundown you're cooked."

Barrows said, "I'll see you, Brant."

Brant wheeled the horse back then and sat considering him. Barrows spoke again. "You want to step out of that saddle, Brant, and have it out here and now? I'll give you plenty of time to dismount."

The tall man chuckled again. "You wouldn't have a chance, Barrows. One move from you, and you'll be dead. Look at my men."

Barrows looked then and saw that they had eased their rifles out of their scabbards. Apparently Brant had given them some signal. "I'm not a fool, Barrows, but you are." He glanced toward the house where Ella Tucker had appeared at a window. "Anyhow, I don't aim to mess up this yard. Too nice for it. But you know where you stand now. *Adios.*"

He wheeled the black and moved out of the yard, followed by his men.

Barrows walked slowly across the yard. Amos looked up at him lazily. "Well, what next, rancher?"

Les Barrows rolled a smoke and struck a match. "We'll have some grub, then I'll saddle up for town." Then, casually: "Well, Amos, maybe I'll never own the Flying T. Who can tell? Maybe somebody else got a better right to it than I."

Amos studied him through a cloud of smoke. He saw the glint in Barrows' eyes. Amos whistled softly. "I told you your life wasn't worth a nickel. All right, so we have a little grub and ride back to town."

"No need for you to go," Barrows said. "You stay here. I just got a little business there. I'll be back."

Idly, Amas eased the gun from his holster and broke it; he spun the cylinder. "All right, so I stay here." He murmured something under his breath. Then: "Look here. Somethin' is sticking in your craw; you got the signs all over you. Don't tell me you're takin' up Brant on his offer."

Barrows said, "Not exactly. Let's go see what's to eat."

DURING the meal Ed sat watching Barrows. Suddenly Ed said, "I heard you talking to Amos out there. Some of it, anyway. Don't tell me you got your fill already . . . that Brant got you back off the place that soon."

Barrows said evenly, "Do I look like that?"

"No." The man's tone was bitter. "But you said maybe you'd never own this spread."

"I didn't say I was backing off it," Barrows said softly.

These Flying T hands were saddleworn and year-bitten. None of them were above average, but they were good men. He wondered what was eating them. Ed said then, "Thing is, we're plumb sick of Brant and his bunch riding all over this range. We rode for Miss Ella's old man. Like a damn' fool, he left the ranch to his son-in-law. Didn't believe in women being boss. Now look at it. Bet he's spinnin' in his grave right this minute."

Shame hit Barrows then. The woman had been modest about her claims. The place was truly hers. He had no right here, and neither had Tucker. And Brant . . . he could see Brant wanting her, year after year working Tucker further into his power, getting him deeper and deeper into hock, ruining a man easy to ruin, but somehow never getting the final trump of possession to the place and thus a chance at Ella Tucker.

He got to his feet, brushed the crumbs from his mouth with the back of his hand. He said to Amos and Ed, "I'll be riding into town. Before I go I want you two to come over to the house and put your witness signatures on a piece of paper."

As they crossed the yard, Amos said, "I'll be ready to ride whenever you go."

"Nothing doing! I got into this with both eyes open, because I wanted to. You were against it from the start. No, Amos, this is one of those things a man sometimes gets into because it's in the cards. I'll go it on the lonesome, savvy?"

Amos grunted. Ed said, unperturbed, "Any rub you have with Brant, you can count me and the others in. They said for me to tell you." And he kept walking on,

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looking neither right nor left as if he had merely remarked on the weather.

They found Ella Tucker in the dining room. "Still don't know what to do," she told Barrows.

"This is your home," he said. "Don't ever think of packing out of your own home. Could I see that deed again?"

She produced the deed, and he stepped into the kitchen and brought pen and ink. Swiftly he crossed off the will and wrote in a transfer instead. Amos and Ed signed their names. Ed looked at him. "You're a damned white man," he said slowly.

Ella Tucker's hands shook as she looked at the paper. "Sign it," Barrows said. "All you have to do now is to have it notarized and recorded. Now your home is your own."

"Looks like better times ahead," Ed said. He and Amos put on their hats and went out.

"But I couldn't accept this." Ella stared at Barrows, her face flushed.

"It's yours anyway, whether you accept or not. Not a hundred card games could change the fact that the right is yours, not mine. . . ." He walked toward the door. "I'll be around for a while, if it's all right with you. Brant gave me a ticket out of Overton Valley. Well, I'm not sure I'm the one who'll be using that ticket."

She paled. "Brant . . . I wish you wouldn't try to buck him. All this trouble you've got into, and just for nothing. No," she held the paper toward him, "I don't see how I ever rightly could accept."

"Men like Brant and what they stand for will pass," he said. Even the high rider has to topple." He hesitated. Then: "And your husband . . . well I don't figure he'll ever have the nerve to show his face here again. . . ." His hand was on the doorknob of the front door.

Her face darkened. "I can just hope he never—"

The clatter of hoofs outside made him open the door as Raymond Tucker mounted the steps and walked into the house.

TUCKER looked from Barrows to his wife. His eyes were bleary, his face unshaven. He seemed sober, but it was obvious that he had just recovered from a drunk. He took a step toward Ella. "Don't believe everything you hear, Ella. I was tricked, tricked, I tell you."

He turned to Barrows. "I'll square things with you. Don't think you hold all the cards because you have that deed." He laughed thickly. "It isn't worth the paper it's written on. It doesn't give you the right to chase my wife from house and home. Nor me, either. Don't be a fool."

Barrows bit his lip and said nothing. He saw the embarrassment on Ella Tucker's face.

"It's all a trick," Tucker said again. "A cheating trick. Don't blame me, Ella. They forced and tricked me into staking the ranch. But we'll get it back. They cheated me."

Barrows said then, "Repeat that when you meet me somewhere else—and keep your gun handy."

Ella Tucker said, "You're lying, Ray. Lying, and you know it. I'll not believe a word you say. Pack your personal things and get out."

"Wait."

"You heard her," Barrows said.

Tucker ignored him. "It's a trick between Barrows and Brant. They rigged it up. Brant came in while we were playing. You know he always wanted the Flying T. I thought Barrows here was a stranger when I got in the game. I'd never let Oren get his hands on it. You know that. I always held out against—"

"Oh, stop it, Ray." Ella Tucker did a foolish thing. She held out the transferred deed for her husband to see. "Does this make you a liar or doesn't it? The sooner you get out the better."

Tucker looked from one to the other. "Ah yes. Perhaps that makes better sense,

even. So it was all a trick to deed *her* the ranch." He gave his wife an insinuating wink, "So that's what goes on! Yes, you did use to go riding by yourself at night, now and again. How do I know—"

He didn't finish. Barrows sprang forward, swinging for Tucker's mouth. Tucker stepped around the corner of the hall table and drew his gun.

"Hold it! Hold it, Barrows! I'd as soon plug you as not. So you thought you'd get yourself both woman and ranch in one card game, eh?"

"Shut up, Tucker, or by god I'll—" Barrows' hand almost jumped for his gun despite the odds against him. His face went white.

"I'll shut up when I'm through talking." Tucker pointed to the deed. "Sign it back to me—or take a bullet in the belly."

Barrows didn't move, and Ella Tucker said, "Better do as he says, please. Please."

Barrow shook his head. "Not a chance, ma'am. You move from the room, will you, please. Get out of here quick. Leave me to this."

"Oh, no," Tucker said, tensing. "You both stay here till that deed is signed. You won't get a chance to go for your gun, mister. Rub my nose in the dirt would you, yesterday, when you stuck me with cards! Yeah, where are your tricks now? You see, Barrows, I could get away with killing you even so. There's evidence enough on that paper to justify it." He added slowly, "In fact I could get away with killing the both of you and never mind the deed. So pick up that pen!"

There was madness in the man's eyes. Brant had run him ragged, and now this thing had unstrung him. Raymond Tucker, cheat, gambler, and wastrel, was capable of anything. Barrows saw the madness, saw that Ella Tucker was about to faint. Jumping sideways, throwing the hall table between himself and Tucker, he took a wild chance and went for his gun.

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HIS hand never reached it. He heard two shots rattling the walls of the house. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a small revolver in Ella Tucker's hand.

But no smoke was coming from it, and the shots had come from a .45. His own hand at last lifted his gun from its holster as Tucker dropped his Colt and clutched his chest for a moment before he collapsed. He tried to say something then lay utterly still.

Old Amos, followed by Ed, stepped out from the kitchen door, his Colt still smoking. "Took a long chance that time, Les," he said. "I plugged him the minute I seen what you were trying to do."

Barrows felt dizzy; he ran a hand across his brow and brought it away wet. "Pretty close, Amos."

Amos put two fresh shells in his gun. He said dryly, "Now, Les, ye didn't think I was sittin' out there just smokin' my pipe, did ye?" His manner changed suddenly, "Les, Les, the lady."

Barrows caught her as she reeled against the wall, the little unfired gun clattering to the floor. She seemed to have no weight in his arms. On sudden impulse, wanting to shield her from the bloody spectacle of Tucker on the floor, he carried her upstairs and put her on the bed.

She looked so fragile and still against the pillow that for a moment he wondered whether she were dead; then his fumbling, rough thumb found her pulse. Ed came through the door then with water and a bottle of whisky. He shook his head. "Poor Miss Ella. She's sure been used some rough these last couple of years." He began ministering the water and whisky. "Mrs. Emmet, the housekeeper, is over visiting the Timmons ranch three miles from here. I'm gonna send Slim over after her."

When Barrows came downstairs some time later Amos was entering.

"Tucker's in the stable," Amos said. "I'll get word to the law."

They walked across the yard, and Barrows said, "I'll let Avery know tonight, when I go to town. And this time there won't be any lady present to prevent me pulling my gun. I go alone, savvy?"

In the late afternoon, nearing town, Barrows had to pull off the trail to make room for a large posse headed by the sheriff. He beckoned, and Avery held back and spoke briefly with him. Barrows told him what had occurred at the ranch. "On a hunt?" he said then, indicating the dust of the posse. Avery nodded. "Funny enough, on a lead Tucker gave me." A moment later he had ridden on.

Half an hour later Barrows sat at a corner table in the empty hotel bar, nursing a drink. The town seemed deserted; almost every man was in the posse.

Then in the still distance came the hoofbeats of a couple of horses; shortly after a cautious footfall somewhere. The swing-door creaked.

Oren Brant came in hastily, keeping his attention on Barrows; he walked to the middle of the bar where bottle and glass stood, as if waiting for him.

Little hectic red spots came and went on Brant's cheeks as he watched Barrows. There was deeply stung pride and raging anger in his voice when he said, "So you didn't take my advice."

"I told you I wouldn't."

BARROWS' voice was calm. He had started this game, and now nothing could prevent him from fulfilling his role. The calmness seemed to unnerve Brant a little. "You're a fool, Barrows," he said. It was as if he wanted to impress Barrows with the fact that he had come in person, that the insult was personal, that he had not merely sent his men to do the job.

Barrows continued to refuse to be impressed. "Who's the biggest fool we'll know when the shooting is over," Barrows said with a shrug. "Maybe at the moment the score is against you. Sheriff Avery is out cleaning up the Flying T ranges of